



# DREAMER of Briarfell

FAIRYTALES OF FOLKSHORE: Book Seven

LUCY TEMPEST

# DREAMER OF BRIARFELL

A RETELLING OF SLEEPING BEAUTY

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# DREAMER OF BRIARFELL – A RETELLING OF SLEEPING BEAUTY

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## Disclaimer

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✿ Created with Vellum

For a man to help others with all his gifts and native strength: that is the noblest work.

— OEDIPUS REX, SOPHOCLES

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## INTRODUCTION

Welcome to the magical world of Folkshore!

Fairytales of Folkshore is a series of interconnected fairytale retellings with unique twists on much-loved, enduring themes. It starts with the Cahraman Trilogy, a gender-swapped reimagining of Aladdin.

It is followed by the Rosemead duology, a retelling of Beauty & the Beast, *Princess of Midnight*, a merge of Cinderella and the Snow Queen, and *Dreamer of Briarfell*, a Sleeping Beauty / Robin Hood crossover.

Join each heroine on emotional, thrilling adventures full of magic, mystery, friendship and romance where true love is found in the most unexpected places and the fates of kingdoms hang in the balance.

Coming retellings will be:

Little Mermaid and Hades & Persephone!

Before those will be a Snow White novella, *The Snow Princess*.

# MAP





## CHAPTER ONE



Everyone in the Folkshore knew that as they were born, they would one day die. Even in Faerie, where they lived long enough as to seem immortal, life's end was still inevitable. The only uncertainty was when exactly Death would make his claim. That was where I was different from everyone else. I knew precisely when I was going to die. The second the sun set on my eighteenth birthday. That was three weeks from now. That sentence had been decreed by the curse inflicted on me by a malevolent fairy, to punish my mother's arrogance and my father's broken promises. That frightful fact had ruled my life and hung over my neck like an executioner's blade since I was old enough to understand what death meant. The one reason I hadn't despaired all these years was because this curse came with the means to break it included. Up until a few months ago, I'd thought such means had been arranged. I'd been wrong. All that false sense of security had done was cost me vital time. So here I was, subjecting myself to more humiliation in my efforts to ensure I didn't end up paying for that cruel fairy's whims and my parents' transgressions with my very life. "You are indeed a wondrous beauty, Princess Fairuza," my companion slurred. I almost winced at the nasal whine of Prince Jean-Jaques. Besides being the third in line to the throne of the insignificant island kingdom of Ys, he was a pot-bellied drunkard who was older than my father. His dull expression further elongated his grey-bearded face as he leered at me, his bulging eyes slightly crossing, with the rank inebriation I could smell from across the table. "I didn't believe the tales of your beauty until I saw it for myself." He lurched forward, bridging the distance I'd pointedly placed between us, almost shoving his face into mine. "I can't wait for your unique features to be immortalized in our wedding portrait." Just entertaining the possibility of such a portrait with that old fool of a minor royal churned my stomach. Especially after I'd lived my life thinking I was destined to marry the young and handsome heir of a major kingdom. How far I'd fallen. To think I'd crossed the Folkshore only months ago, believing I'd marry Crown Prince Cyaxares of Cahraman. My mother and my uncle, his father, had betrothed us soon after the curse had been cast.

I'd always had anxieties about something preventing our union, but I'd learned how to suppress them, leaving me mostly secure in my future.

Even after Cyaxares had announced he wouldn't make me his bride outright, and had held that outrageous Bride Search competition, I'd been assured of winning it, and breaking the curse well before its literal deadline.

But nothing had gone as I'd expected.

Cyaxares had done everything in his power to end our betrothal, and had fought to choose another. A low-born girl who'd turned out to be a thief and a spy no less, and who'd almost destroyed his kingdom.

So she'd risked her life to restore it, and after our harrowing experiences together, I could no longer hate her. Still, the fact remained. Between the so-called Lady Ada and Cyaxares—now the King of Cahraman after Uncle Darius's abdication—they'd cost me my one assured chance of survival.

I'd had to return home, rejected and defeated, my only hope of preventing the curse from claiming my life resting on the precarious hope of finding another man on par with him.

But now any hope that remained was dashed. This drunken old goat was among the last in the long list of inferior suitors I'd gone through since my return to Arbore three months ago. After him, there were only his half-brothers, who were also widowed, less noble, and with even more children.

Just the idea of having to marry one of them was enough to make me think death was the much better fate.

Raising my teacup to hide my grimace, I gulped down a scalding mouthful to push down the toast rising back in my throat, before putting on my best gracious smile, producing my most lighthearted voice, and thanking him profusely.

Jean-Jacques abruptly reached out and grasped my wrist, and I lurched with a gasp, miraculously not spilling a drop of my hibiscus tea.

"You would look lovely in green, positively radiant." His slurring was accompanied by spittle this time as he pulled my hand towards him.

Smothering a distressed squeal, my mind's eye traitorously flashed back to the last time I'd been manhandled. Though it hadn't been a man I was forced to entertain, but an eyeless, ravenous monster who'd wanted to eat me.

Reminding myself that Jean-Jacques was more likely to drool on me than bite off a chunk of my shoulder, I tamped down on the remembered horror. Not that the stench of his soured-wine breath was that much better than the fetid rot of that monster.

With every nerve in my body, I wanted to throw his doughy, clammy hand off me. But I couldn't risk making a scene amidst the courtiers and the prince's party, who were taking their morning tea alongside us on the castle terrace.

"I'm sure I would," I agreed tightly, looking down pointedly at the hand weakening my grip on my teacup. "Now, if I can have my hand back, please. I'd hate to stain this pearly-white tablecloth..."

"Pearls, yes. You will wear Mother's pearls in the portrait." He tugged at me, his greying face closing in. "And you seem to have pearly teeth. I should like to see them up close, to check on your health and all."

As his own yellowed teeth filled my vision, revulsion overtook any courtesy I had left for this man or his companions. Certainly any hope I could withstand him, even to save my life.

I stopped resisting his pull, letting my wrist twist, dumping the scalding contents of my cup down his shirt.

Jean-Jacques jumped up squawking in pain, eliciting a storm of amused whispers as he dabbed frantically at the ruby stain on his chest.

“Oh, dear, what a mess!” I breathed in pretend apology. “I hope you have a change of clothes, Prince Jean-Jacques. Hibiscus is an expensive import from my mother’s homeland of Cahraman, and its stain is permanent.”

Jean-Jacques swung unsteadily towards me in outrage, but I had already gotten up and was striding back inside.

Keeping my head high as I passed through tables, I tuned out the gossiping snickers and the prince’s drunken swearing.

Stepping out of the rare Arborean sun into the empty sitting room, I found my handmaidens where I’d left them watching this train wreck unfold. I waited until I’d crossed out of everyone’s line of sight before I mirrored Agnë’s disappointment with a slouch, and Meira’s displeasure with a scowl.

“I can’t believe I had to tolerate that disgusting fool,” I seethed, rubbing at my forearm, the revolting ghost of his sweaty grip lingering on my skin. “Checking my teeth, indeed! As if I was some mare he’d come to acquire. And you’d think this was the dark ages, with his preference for wine over water.”

“It’s a wonder he hasn’t drunk himself to death at his age,” Meira said snidely.

At that, Agnë smacked her upside the head.

“Ow!” Meira rubbed her head, ruffling her curly, dark brown hair, brows slanting as they dipped over glaring, same-colored eyes. “What?”

“You know what!” Agnë squeaked indignantly, before turning to escort me away with a gentle hand, her big, watery-blue eyes sorrowful, sunlight bouncing off her blonde hair in a golden halo. “We still have the other four candidates to go through this weekend. Surely one of them will be the one.”

Before the last few failed attempts, I would have striven to echo her optimism, or to appreciate her aversion to having the word “death” mentioned around me. But the reality of having no more viable candidates pressed on me like a boulder, and I could no longer bolster myself with flimsy hope.

There was nothing more to do to stop my impending death. I could almost feel its suffocating fingers squeezing my neck tighter with every breath.

I exhaled. “His half-brothers are nowhere near noble enough anyway. And they’re even shorter, rounder, and amazingly, more off-putting.”

“And two of them have not one but two dead wives to boot,” Meira muttered, before squeaking in protest of another smack up the head.

Agnë turned from reprimanding Meira with a flustered exclamation. “But they are younger!”

“Yes, indeed,” I sighed dejectedly. “The youngest is only twenty years my senior.”

With none of us having anything more to add to this mess, I let them herd me away to the last place I wanted to be at the moment.

Gliding across polished floors spread with silver granite, and following the curving path set by royal-blue carpet, we passed through six sprawling sections of the castle’s middle floor. When we were at the end of the corridor leading to the king’s quarters, it was still too soon.

My dreaded destination was flanked by two guards garbed in the Arborean black-and-gold royal uniforms. They were holding their spears at attention and staring ahead stoically, pretending not to hear the shouting coming from behind the soaring, engraved mahogany doors.

I approached reluctantly, each step punctuated with a stilted breath, and knocked with the

blooming rose handle.

My knock went unheard as my mother shouted from within, “Absolutely not! I will not have any more of those things in my home! It’s enough I have to deal with you making that half-breed your princess!”

A rib-rattling fist slam, followed by a booming growl from my brother Leander made me flinch. “Don’t talk about her that way!”

“That’s what she is!” my mother retorted shrilly.

“This morning only keeps getting better,” I muttered bitterly to Agnë and Meira as I gestured for them to leave me, before pushing the door open.

As the guards rushed to close it behind me, I entered my parents’ royal quarters to find an all-too-familiar scene.

By the windows overlooking the gardens and Eglantine, our capital, my father, King Florent of Arbore, sat with his back to the whole scene. His spectacles were halfway down the bridge of his nose as he pored over papers in his hands, ignoring the argument between his wife and eldest son.

Father had always seemed he would rather be on the frontline with his soldiers than in a room with my mother. And until recently, he had been. He’d stayed there, even after the war had officially ended, involving himself in negotiating the peace treaty with our rival kingdom of Avongart to its last, minute detail. I suspected because it had been the best excuse to continue avoiding his wife. Not that I blamed him. Everyone gave Queen Zomoroda as wide a berth as they could.

But once that deal had been struck, he’d been eagerly herded back towards Eglantine to preside over the war’s end celebrations, and to reclaim the reins of the kingdom.

I’d gathered they couldn’t push my uncle, Prince Jonquil, off the throne fast enough. I’d heard enough covert comments before I’d left to Cahraman to realize he’d been an inadequate replacement. It seemed that under his rule, the kingdom had suffered, not only from the war’s repercussions, but from his ineptitude.

I couldn’t help but wonder how different things would have been had my brother gotten the chance to become our wartime regent. The chance he’d been robbed of when his own curse had fully manifested.

From his efficiency in championing my case since he’d returned from Rosemead, I was certain the kingdom wouldn’t have been so eager for my father’s return. He’d rounded me up every unmarried royal in the Folkshore in record time. That none had worked out wasn’t his fault. He’d gone above and beyond. In fact, he seemed even more desperate about my situation than I was.

Now the dread of telling him his efforts had failed rivaled the fear of my inevitable fate itself.

Letting out another ragged breath, I tried to move out of the entryway. When I couldn’t seem to steady my shaking legs, I decided to remain unannounced until I could gather what today’s problem was.

“When will you accept that she is the best thing to ever happen to me?” Leander paced in front of our mother, hands fisted at his sides as if to curb the urge to shake her, his sonorous voice filling the chamber with his frustration.

He was wearing a loose, white dress shirt, fitted brown pants, and black leather riding boots, the same kind of casual wear he’d been sporting since his return, to our mother’s fierce disapproval. I myself preferred his new informal look, even if he now looked a little wild with his acorn-brown hair escaping his ponytail, and falling over his flushed face.

Our mother—impeccably dressed in a forest-green gown, and adorned in jewelry studded with her namesake, emeralds—was taking up the couch with her skirts and flat-faced cats, Sheir and

Shokkar. A prized breed from her land, favored for their docile demeanor, they looked perpetually annoyed. I would be too if I had to stomach her theatrics all day.

“After what she’s done to save me, the least you could do is appreciate her,” Leander rumbled.

“She wouldn’t have had to save you, if her kind hadn’t cursed you to begin with, now would she?” she scoffed.

So this was about her circling back to her disapproval of his choice of bride. Oh joy.

At least I wouldn’t be around that much longer to suffer more of her unrelenting intrusions.

It was also good that Bonnibel was off keeping a visiting duke’s wife company. I would have hated to make uncomfortable eye contact with her in this situation. Again.

Our mother had always been viciously vocal about her hatred of anything magical, especially fairies, and she hadn’t been holding her tongue around Bonnibel. Not that I could blame her. It was a sentiment she had every right to hold, when a fairy had cursed her eldest children—even if in response to her own inadvisable threats. Before I’d gone to Cahraman, I would have no doubt reacted the same way to Leander bringing one home.

But what I’d been through there, along with seeing my brother whole and happy, not to mention my fast-approaching demise, had changed things for me. Not my feelings towards fairies, but it had certainly tempered my reactions.

“And how do you know things happened the way you think they did?” our mother hissed, setting her teacup on its saucer with a menacing *clink*. “You expect me to believe this half-breed came to you by sheer coincidence? This might have been that wretched fairy queen’s plan all along, to manipulate you into marrying one of her kind. That’s what she said she wanted the day she cursed you and your sister!”

I didn’t need to waste any more of my dwindling time listening to this circular argument.

But the moment I decided to retreat, she caught sight of me.

“Fairuza, come here,” she boomed, pointing imperiously to the armchair beside her. “Tell your brother how you really feel about this!”

Leander snapped his head around, swishing his ponytail over his shoulder, his eyes clouding with the sad look reserved just for me.

It was still strange to see him fully human again. I was used to him being smaller, clean-shaven, with ear-length hair, and the beginnings of his curse warping his features. But that was almost four years ago, before his state had devolved, and he’d been boarded up in that castle in Rosemead.

Now he stood taller than our father, with a dark, trim beard and thick brows that made his profile reminiscent of our uncle Darius. The one thing he had retained from his time as the fabled Beast of Rosemead was his thick mane of long hair. Ultimately, in appearance, he had become a stranger to me.

The only things recognizable about him were the features we shared, our pale-gold skin and turquoise eyes. Those were the result of our parents’ cross-cultural marriage, the political match made to unite the westernmost and easternmost kingdoms of the Folkshore.

I flopped down on the gilded chair adjacent to Mother’s claw-foot couch, dreading being forced to voice any opinion of Bonnibel. From our limited conversations, I found her nice enough, and I was endlessly grateful for her saving my brother. But I still couldn’t overlook what she was, the daughter of a human peasant and a minor fairy princess. Not to mention that she’d turned out to be the best friend of Ada Al-Berlanti, the girl who’d soon wed Cyaxares, and become the Queen of Cahraman, instead of me.

In short, I was quite conflicted about her.

But my opinion didn't matter, just as it never did about anything, all my life. Only Leander's mattered here, anyway.

"Maman, must we rehash this?" I said tersely. "You're not changing his mind about marrying her."

"I'm not talking about her," she said "her" the way one would reference a broken sewer pipe. "I'm talking about your brother's plans for you!"

I blinked at her. "Plans? What plans?"

Mother's artfully drawn brows shot up as she snapped her enraged gaze to Leander. "You didn't tell her?"

My heart roused from the sluggish rhythm of despondency into a gallop of alarm. "Tell me what?"

Leander glared down at Mother. "I was about to, in private, in a way that wouldn't scare her, like you're so intent on doing."

"Go ahead!" she sneered, her dark, glossy hair threatening to unfurl from its updo as she aggressively wagged a finger between us. "Tell her how you want to throw her to the wolves, in a way that won't scare her!"

"I actually said werewolves," Leander said in heavy sarcasm. "You must understand I feel a certain kinship with them, considering until recently, I basically was one."

I let out a tremulous exhalation. "Can you two just tell me what you're talking about, so I can get on with my day? I have very few of those left."

Leander grimaced as if I'd punched him.

Avoiding his pained gaze, I poured myself a cup of tea in lieu of the one I'd sacrificed to rid myself of that awful prince.

After an awkward sip, I raised my eyes again, trying not to sound sorry for myself, and failing miserably. "According to our list, I still have to meet with Prince Jean-Jaques's half-brothers, my last candidates. Not that I should bother. With all being widowers, some more than once, if I somehow settled on one of them, I would be sealing my fate, rather than preventing it."

"That's exactly why I proposed the plan Mother is taking such an exception to." Leander dragged a chair, sat down, and leaned close, his whole body tense. "I proposed a way to find new candidates for our cause. I even corresponded with some, and a handful are willing to visit. Though I haven't expressed the concept of courting you yet."

Hope I'd thought extinguished soared, only for confusion to swoop down on it like a vulture. "You mean there are more royal heirs? Why didn't you say so before?"

Mother cut Leander's attempted answer off with her shrillest screech yet, "*Because they're not human!*"

I blinked between them, stunned.

Leander gritted his teeth. "What I was about to say is that I didn't suggest these men to start with, because I believed you wouldn't consider them viable prospects. I decided to leave them as a last recourse, if we exhausted all other options. Now, we have." His eyes sought out mine, intense and earnest. "We must seek out nobles from other races, be it shapeshifters, sorcerers, or even fairies."

That statement made me almost swallow my tongue.

The Leander I knew was not the joking type. But we'd spent years apart, changing drastically in that time, so I had to entertain the possibility that he now was.

But as he stared at me expectantly, with nothing but the sound of my escalating breaths and my cup rattling on its saucer filling the silence, I became certain. He would never joke about something like this.

Setting down the cup before I spilled the tea over myself this time, I stammered, "Leo, you can't

be serious. The curse said I can only be saved by the noblest of *men*.”

“We have to be flexible with our definition of men, just like we’ve already been with that of noblest.”

I almost jumped at Father’s ragged voice as he appeared beside Leander’s chair. I vaguely noticed his semi-formal attire—a sky-blue vest the same color of his eyes, a white shirt, and deep-blue trousers. His greying pale-blond hair looked messy, like he had been running his hand through it.

Escaping his weary gaze, my eyes dropped to his hand and the papers he was gripping. They bore Leander’s handwriting, made familiar through our correspondence during the early days of his imprisonment in Rosemead.

That had stopped when his transformation had rendered him unable to write. His last letter had been dictated to his friend Lord Clancy Gestum, the Duke of Briarfell, wishing me luck in my voyage to Cahraman.

The trip I’d been confident would end with my curse broken.

I’d had no reason to think otherwise, when I’d prepared all my life to become Cyaxares’s perfect bride. I’d thought that, and our arranged betrothal, would suffice for him to declare his love and commit to take me as his bride.

Instead, Ada had come out of nowhere, and beaten me in the competition for his heart and hand.

I’d thought it was over for me, that I would never find a replacement in time. And this was why Leander, along with Lord Gestum, had drawn up the plan they’d called “speed-courting.”

It had been essentially holding my own version of Cyaxares’s Bride Search. But unlike Cyaxares—or Cyrus as he preferred to be called—who’d invited fifty girls from all levels in the hierarchy, I’d had a limited pool of options. What the curse described as the “noblest of men.”

Noblest, by definition, meant a king or at least an heir to a throne. But I’d wasted my first seventeen years banking on my betrothal to Cyrus. By the time he’d rejected me, there was a severe shortage of bachelors in that echelon of nobility. What remained were either too young to understand what courting even was, or were, like Prince Jean-Jacques and his brothers, old enough to be my father, and barely noble. Leander had included such men in our list of suitors as an act of pure desperation.

I’d come to this chamber knowing I was already out of options and didn’t have much time left. Three weeks to be exact.

But other races? Could I wed someone inhuman, even to save my life?

As if hearing my thoughts, Father touched my shoulder soothingly. “Fairuza, darling, your brother and I would do anything to save you. I understand your aversion, but we have no choice anymore.” My mother began to protest, but Father cut her off harshly, his eyes mirroring Leander’s agitation. “We *will* consider Leander’s new candidates.”

Carefully, as if trying not to spook me, Father handed me the papers.

Almost in a trance, I took them, my vision blurring over Leander’s handwriting.

“One of these might be the one for you, like Bonnibel was the one for Leander,” Father said. “I pray one is.”

Shaking my head, I forced my eyes to focus on the list of names, each with a title and specifications.

There was one of those aforementioned werewolves Leander had snarked about, dubbed the King in the Wild. Another candidate was an oligarch from a Campanian city-state, with a merchant prince for a father, and nymph princess for a mother. Reading further down the list, all candidates seemed to range from questionable to wildly unsuitable.

While this described Bonnie perfectly, my curse was different from Leander's, which had only required any beautiful girl to love him despite his beastly form. I couldn't afford questionable or unsuitable with my curse's very specific requirement.

Then my eyes landed on a name from a kingdom in the far northeast of the Folkshore.

Though I'd only heard about Opona, a land of snow and sorcerers, in distrustful whispers, its representative was titled Grand Duke Nikolai, which sounded lofty. And his given age was just twenty-five.

Before I dared raise my hopes, I looked up at Father. "What is a grand duke?"

"It's their version of a crown prince," he said, the same hopeful glint in his eyes.

A young crown prince of a major kingdom was so far my best possibility since Cyrus!

As if sensing my thoughts, Leander stood up and bent to tap the papers. "So, what do you think?"

Mouth dryer than the sun-baked streets of Cahraman's capital, Sunstone, I looked to Mother.

Thanks to my father's unaccustomed harshness, she'd lapsed into unprecedented speechlessness. She must have realized this was happening no matter her feelings on the matter. But her fear and hatred of anyone inhuman ran too deep for her to support this endeavor, even if it meant saving me.

I moved on to Father, and my heart clenched at seeing how anxious and exhausted he looked. He'd survived the horrors of war, and had led his kingdom back to peace. He should have had some peace himself, not come home to a daughter whose days were numbered. I owed it to him as much as to myself to try anything at all to survive this curse.

Then I looked at the mastermind of this plan, who was putting all he had into the hope of recreating his salvation for me. Leander was the closest person to me in this world, and I owed it to him to honor his efforts, to do all I could so he wouldn't live with the guilt of failing me.

Not quite hopeful, yet not entirely hopeless anymore, I asked, "How fast can they get here?"

"Within the week," Leander said at once, giving me a forced, encouraging grin.

I had to wonder, if he looked this unnerving with normal, human teeth, how terrifying had he been with fangs?

But more importantly, how had Bonnie fallen in love with him when he'd looked like a beast? She couldn't have known that a handsome prince lay beneath that scary exterior.

This led me to a similar observation about Cyrus, who'd masqueraded as a servant to spy on his prospective brides, deceiving us all about his identity. And neither had he known the truth about Ada.

A sudden burst of clarity almost knocked me over.

This was the one thing in common between my brother and my cousin finding their betrothed. They'd both removed their title from the equation, and all the assumptions, expectations, and falseness that came with it.

That had to be it.

Feeling my heart clattering with a hope I'd long forgotten, I hugged the list Leander had made. "I'll do it. But under one condition."

"Darling, it's a little late for you to be picky—" Father was cut off by Leander's elbow jamming into his side.

"Anything you want," Leander promised hurriedly.

"I want none of my suitors to know why you invited them, nor would they see my face or know anything about me. Not until I have seen and gotten to know them as they really are." I covered my face with my hands, leaving only my eyes visible. "To that end, we will hold a masked ball."



## CHAPTER TWO



Exactly a week after I'd agreed to Leander's new plan, the castle's main ballroom was filled to the brim. With its gigantic size, that was quite a feat.

But hundreds of nobles from all over the Folkshore now mingled under the same roof for the first time in ages.

From my exploratory stroll among the crowds, I'd heard conversations that ranged from discussing post-war policies, to exploring business opportunities, to arranging marriages.

This, in fact, was the official reason for the ball, to celebrate a new era rife with possibilities, after the peaceful end to our five-year war with Avongart, and by extension, the rest of its allied Northland Kingdoms.

The invitations had said the masks were vital to that endeavor, protecting against preconceptions getting in the way of creating new connections, or of having a good time.

Naturally, I'd had my suitors pointed out to me in advance.

I now stood by the main ballroom doors with my handmaidens, my right foot tapping a nervous rhythm with the jaunty music accompanying a female singer in a gilded half-mask. My heart was rattling in my chest as I surveyed the attendees, waiting for my first target to show himself.

Smoothing my sweaty hands down my dress, I was again relieved at the absence of a petticoat and hoop-skirt. I hadn't been wearing those since my return from Cahraman. And when everyone had tried to convince me to make tonight an exception, I'd pointed out it would have been counterproductive. I didn't want to look "my best." I'd opted for a simple, sleeveless dress that would be easy to dance in.

Agnë and Meira had argued for an hour over what color I should wear, the former championing blue and the latter, pink. But just because I was breaking all other rules tonight anyway, I'd gone with fuchsia. A color I'd always liked, but hadn't worn since the royal painter had told me it didn't suit my complexion.

I'd also opted for a white-and-grey, horse-face mask, anatomically correct save for eye holes facing forward. Along with the unsuitable dress and unstyled hair, I was probably an eyesore. I would also throw all courtly courtesies to the wind.

But what had flattering gowns and hairstyles, and impeccable etiquette done for me so far? Whoever showed interest in me tonight, must be the one whose declaration of love could save me.

"There's Lord Hippolytus," Agnë whispered excitedly through her plain mask of oakwood, with horizontal slits for her mouth and eyes.

I looked where she was pointing. Hippolytus, the wealthy Campanian son of a nymph princess,

was sauntering towards us in a polished bronze mask cast in a generic male face, with the eye holes baring bored eyes.

I pushed away from the wall, prayers of “Please, please, please be the one” churning in my head as I glided towards him.

Emboldened by my hidden identity, I caught his hand as he passed me, pulling him towards the dance floor filled with swaying pairs. “Dance with me!”

He stiffened, ripping his hand from mine. “I think not!”

I steeled myself against his petulant harshness, stood my ground. “Why not? Isn’t that what you’re here for?”

“I didn’t come to dance,” he bit off. “I came to see if anyone in this dreary kingdom is worth my time.”

Sweat sprouted under my hair and dress, but I blocked his way when he moved to push past me, and kept moving to the music, bound on embarrassing him into engaging me. According to the rules of masked balls, it was rude to refuse an offer from another attendee.

“That’s the purpose of dancing with people tonight, to get to know them, and see if you get along.” When he tried to circumvent me again, I stepped into his path, extending my hand. “Just for one song.”

I sensed his annoyance rising, but he finally gave a long-suffering sigh and accepted my hand. “Fine.”

Hippolytus was quite handsome, a classical sculpture come to life. When I’d seen him from afar earlier, he had the sharp profile, crown of dark curls, and slim, muscled form that Lower Campanians modeled their gods after. Even with his face covered now, he cut a truly striking figure.

But as the dance progressed, I discovered he had as much depth as a birdbath.

All he could talk about was his family’s properties, how expensive his horses were, the worth of the art he commissioned, and the general opulence of his lifestyle. And he fully expected me to swoon over every detail he bragged about.

It wasn’t long into the dance that I realized something else. From Hippolytus’s overt comments as he looked around, it became clear that he was looking for me.

Though Leander’s invitation to my candidates had said nothing about courting me, everyone knew the Princess of Arbore was of marriageable age, and that she hadn’t found a human husband yet. And Hippolytus was clearly here for me. Or rather, my dowry. Likely to spend it on gaudy real estate furnished with things such as solid gold bathtubs.

In short, I had no trouble judging this ethereal pretty-boy as a narcissistic, overgrown child who could never love anyone but himself. And that was saying something coming from me, the princess everyone in Cahraman had accused of being a vain, spoiled brat.

I guessed that was what everyone here thought of me as well, if Leander had placed that vapid gander among the top of my candidates.

Not that I could do anything about that opinion now. If I failed to find the man who’d break my curse, I’d die in two weeks’ time and that would be my legacy. The tragic princess who was useless in life, and pointless in death.

On the bright side, the pointed tips of Hippolytus’s ears, along with the vivid circles of colors in his eyes served to introduce me to inhuman features.

After the unpleasant experience of having my feet trampled by that vacuous bore was over, I moved on to my second candidate.

Björn Torkelsson was a shapeshifter from Avongart, and an atheling—a potential prince—a title given to all of the king’s male children, legitimate or otherwise. The succession was determined by

election, a council choosing which offspring was worth the throne.

I'd previously seen him without the mask that barely covered the top of his face, with large slots for his chestnut-brown eyes. I supposed he was handsome enough, in that burly, bearded manner of Northerners. As I'd approached him, I'd been intrigued by his intricate leather attire, and the dirty-blond hair arranged in complex side braids, which held some specific significance in his culture's hierarchy.

My intrigue had persisted until he'd almost scared me senseless.

His response to my offer to dine with me had been to haul me off my feet and into a rib-cracking squeeze. I'd thought I'd offended him, and he'd crush me to death right there and then.

Just as I'd finally gathered enough wits to struggle, he'd jovially dropped me in a seat at a table, and went about piling food in front of us.

Between his own excessive eating and drinking, he practically force-fed me more food than I'd eaten in the past week. Whenever I protested, he called me skinny and many other pitying adjectives, while praising the hardy figures of Northlander women.

Aside from how he'd initially frightened me, how brash he was, I found Björn to be interesting company. This mountain of a man couldn't speak without constantly poking me and gesturing exuberantly with his massive hands, and was so loud he managed to drown out the din of the packed ballroom. He also somehow ended up making me promise I'd let him know when I could go on a walk into downtown Eglantine with him, so I could see him shift into a bear and fish in the river.

Though I felt mostly stunned amusement towards him, he was the first suitor I'd ever looked forward to dining with again, if mostly to relive the overwhelming yet entertaining experience.

"What a strange, strange man," Meira commented as we regrouped at the corner of the ballroom, lifting our masks for a break from their stuffy confinement. "I've never seen someone so friendly without it being suspicious."

I nodded as I looked over at Björn who was sweeping a couple under his massive arms and steering them to another table. "The friendliness was indeed a nice surprise, since I'd first thought he'd maul me for daring to approach him. At least I now know what a bear hug is—literally."

"I don't think actual bear hugs have any affection in them," Meira mused. "Human form or not, he's still a predator."

"Don't be mean," Agnë chided. "He was very nice, a gentle giant."

"You consider all that poking and squeezing gentle?" Meira teased her. "If you like big men so much, why don't you pursue him yourself?"

As Agnë flushed red, I sighed wryly. "I think we should focus less on how jolly bear-man turned out to be, and worry more about how unattractive he found me. He would not stop talking about how frail I looked, and likening me to his land's little girls. Just how big are the women up there?"

"I believe they match their men," Agnë muttered, before rushing to add, "But you are without a doubt more beautiful than any of those hefty, square-jawed milkmaids."

"He really didn't seem to think so." Exhaling, I scrutinized my appearance in a nearby gilded mirror.

I'd always taken pride in my appearance, and been told that I possessed a rare beauty due to the uncommon mixture of my heritage. I also never thought of myself as small or skinny. Even without the comparison to my shorter handmaidens, I was taller than average, and as slim and graceful as a girl in an Arborean court was expected to be.

Now I tried to examine myself from the perspective of someone who held other standards of beauty. Björn was clearly used to big, boisterous blondes, while I was a refined and reserved

brunette. He probably didn't think my dark-brown hair that fell in big waves down my back, was the treasure my mother insisted it was. He seemed to take one look at my long, delicate neck, slim shoulders, and elegant limbs and thought me fragile. But what if he saw my face?

No. I bet my high cheekbones, sharp jawline, and small, thin nose would only reinforce his opinion. As for my pronounced brow ridge, which made my dark, dense brows arch higher, along with my pouty lips and heavy-lidded almond eyes, I supposed he'd think I looked cold, haughty—unapproachable. Everything I didn't want to be while fishing for a declaration of love from a man in order to save my life.

The one trait he'd complimented me on, when he'd shoved a lamp in my face to examine my mask, was the color of my eyes. That bright turquoise, like the precious stone I was named after, appealed to everyone. Not that it had been enough to spark his interest, and it hadn't even registered in Hippolytus's self-absorbed vanity.

I blew out another sigh of resignation. "Which one's next?"

Agnë browsed the room, then pointed at a man wearing a gilded cloak. "Kyrillos of Chrysopolis. I hear he claims to be a demigod."

Meira burst out laughing. "And I'm Queen Isolda of Winter!"

Agnë's usual smile froze. In the mirror, I saw Meira's eyes bulge, as if she couldn't believe what she'd just said.

"Who's Queen Isolda?" I asked.

Agnë laughed nervously, waving the question off. "Oh, you know, a character in a folktale where we come from."

I frowned down at her. "I thought you two came from different lands."

I had never seen them agree on anything. Right now, they mirrored each other's expression of horrified dismay.

I nudged each with an elbow. "Why are you two looking like I caught you with your hands in my jewelry box?"

Agnë's giggle did nothing to lessen her impression of a cornered rabbit. "Oh, you know how stories travel! What happens in Orestia goes up to the Northlands through trade routes and whatnot."

I held her flustered gaze, my confusion intensifying. "Isolda sounds more like a Northlander name, not the other way around."

Agnë seemed at a loss until Meira clapped her hands, ending the strangely tense moment. "And that's a story for another time! Now off to your meeting with that semi-divine boy before he gets bored and ascends to the heavens or something!"

Both handmaidens urgently herded me towards the refreshments table where Kyrillos was hovering. He had his mask set on top of his head as he sampled the variety of offered drinks, so I could see his face in detail, which I'd previously seen from afar.

He shared a lot of traits with Hippolytus, with features leaning towards pretty, rather than handsome. But unlike him, Kyrillos's halo of curls was sun-bleached, and his shining, tanned skin was from outdoor exposure, not a natural complexion with a beautifying layer of body oil.

Also unlike Hippolytus, he had the decency to notice my approach and greet me. His sedate handshake was almost a letdown after Björn's enthusiastically suffocating bear hug. His palm was rough, with a callous here and there. They made me question more than his supposed divinity.

My nose wrinkled under my mask at the notion that this man might not be noble enough, or even of good breeding. Why else would he be tanned and calloused, if he didn't toil in the sun like some field worker, or work with his hands like a carpenter?

I shook my misgivings away when he introduced himself and asked for my name.

With a curtsey, I introduced myself with the name I was going with tonight, “Zafira.”

“Is that a flower?” he asked.

“It actually means sapphire.”

Kyrrillos fluttered his long golden lashes at me in confusion. “But I thought Arborean girls were always named after flowers.”

“They are. I was supposed to—” I stopped my rambling, sipping my rosé wine until I composed myself. “My mother is not from here. In her family, it is tradition to name girls after gems.”

He nodded. “Fascinating. I, too, was named for my heritage.”

I was educated in the history and languages of Lower Campania and Orestia enough to gather that his name meant something like *little lord*.

Hoping that did mean he was noble enough, I asked, “Which is?”

He pointed upwards, smiling proudly. “My father is the sky god.”

Though Agnë had informed me of that claim, it hadn’t prepared me for hearing it with my own ears. If I could burst out laughing like Meira had, I would have.

My first reaction was to think Leander was desperate enough to invite some delusional idiot to court me. Then as I leaned my hip against the table, scrutinizing him, other considerations followed.

Kyrrillos looked human, but there was a certain sensation emanating from him. Like the one that wafted off Bonnie, if not quite the same. And as she was a half-fairy, why shouldn’t there be half-gods, too?

The claim of divine heritage was common along the southwestern and central regions of the Folkshore, with plenty of classical tales and myths featuring heroes spawned from the coupling of humans and deities. I myself had met one other person who’d said she’d been fathered by a god.

Cora of the Granary, one of the five finalists in the Bride Search, hadn’t seemed to care for her mother’s story about her origins. But I wouldn’t discount her claim, considering what I’d seen that enormous farm girl do with my own eyes.

A shudder ran through me as the terrible memory assailed me again, and I was unable to focus on Kyrrillos for the remainder of our encounter.

He didn’t seem that taken with me, either.

As we parted ways, the music picked up, its joyfulness framing my deepening dejection.

My handmaidens gestured excitedly at me in the distance, pointing at my fourth candidate.

Feeling hope drain out of me with every step, I dragged my feet towards him.

Here went nothing.

## CHAPTER THREE



As lofty as the title King in the Wild was, it didn't do justice to the stories surrounding Lycaon.

It was said he was the overlord all shapeshifter tribe leaders deferred to, rumored to be millennia old—the first man to ever shift into a beast and back at will.

It was more likely he was like my father, King Florent the Tenth, named after a long line of predecessors to give the impression of an undying ruler.

Whatever he truly was, the werewolf was the only so-called king, and therefore, one of my best remaining options. He was also the one candidate I'd woken up this morning being wary of.

And I'd been right to be.

Unable to ask him to dance, or to strike up a conversation, I'd stood there until I'd caught his attention. I'd regretted it the moment he'd turned to pin me with the unblinking stare of those terrible, yellow eyes.

He was all sharp angles, from the grey-brown spikes of his hair, to his triangular chin and painfully prominent cheekbones, to the long canines that flashed through thin, leathery lips. But it was the sight of his claw-like nails that made me want to shriek like a child, and dive under the nearest table, where the captain of the guard and his family sat.

Leander had been, reportedly, far more of a wolf-man than he was—hairy, hunchbacked, with a mouth full of sharp teeth, and claws as long as my fingers. How had Bonnie stomached the sight of him, let alone declared her love for him?

But in my case, it was not me who had to make the declaration. I probably didn't even need to like my potential savior. The curse stipulated that he be the one to proclaim his love.

But so far, none of my suitors had uttered anything close to such a declaration, since they'd all come seeking my hand for every consideration but myself. Even had we demanded they said the words, I believed it wouldn't have worked, since none could have been considered noble enough, anyway.

As for those latest candidates, Hippolytus was more likely to kiss his reflection than me, Björn treated me like a little sister who suffered from malnutrition, Kyrillos had his head in the clouds with his godly father, and Lycaon...

Lycaon looked like he wanted to eat me.

I felt certain if I wasn't in my castle, surrounded by hundreds of people, and within sight of my family and guards, he would have.

I didn't know what exactly I babbled as I tried to extricate myself, repeatedly, but the clawed hand that had closed on my forearm wouldn't budge. All the while he watched me with that detached avarice of a predator.

Then those horrifying fangs were perilously close to my neck as he bent to whisper in my ear, ordering me to walk out of the ballroom with him.

To any onlooker, my handmaidens included, it would seem he was bending closer so I could hear him over the din. He was being so careful, only I knew that he was coercing me. The only way I would get anyone to intervene would be to make a scene.

But if I did, there would go any hope of approaching my other candidates tonight. If I didn't, he wouldn't really hurt me... would he?

Problem was, I felt it in my bones that this was a very dangerous creature. And if he had others like him around, maybe anyone who came to my rescue would be in equal danger. If not now, then later.

Then he was towing me towards the ballroom doors, and I kept telling myself I was letting my previous trauma in Cahraman blow this all out of proportion. He was probably just a creepy old man who'd misunderstood my approach, and would let me go if I explained. If all else failed, I would tell him who I was. Surely he'd let me go then? Surely Leander wouldn't have invited him if he posed real danger?

But the bubble of disgust, fury, and terror building deep in my gut wouldn't listen, threatening to burst any moment now, come what may...

"Camellia, darling! There you are!"

A deep male voice cut through my rising hysteria as a big man barreled between Lycaon and myself, tearing the clawed grip off my forearm.

"I've been looking all over for you!" the newcomer crooned, taking my hands in his.

Confused, I blinked up into the full-head mask of a red-and-white fox, my nerves in shreds.

The man's grip tightened when I tried to move away, and he continued behaving as if he knew me. "Shame on you! You should have left a message that you changed your costume. I thought we agreed to come as fox and hound. I've accosted no less than four other girls tonight and almost got into duels over it."

Mind still foggy, I couldn't make sense of his words. Who was this? Could this be a drunken case of mistaken identity?

"Thankfully, Aunt Florence pointed you out to me before she retired to her guest quarters in the eastern tower. She needs you there urgently, so we must rush away *before someone gets mad.*"

But the eastern tower didn't have guest quarters. And why did he stress these last... Oh.

*Oh!*

He wasn't drunk! He was only giving me a way out of this situation!

"Oh, yes!" I tried to curb my shaking so I could play along convincingly. "We mustn't keep Aunt Florence waiting!"

Lycaon shoved his head between us, growling menacingly, "I wasn't finished with her."

"You are now," the intruder said blithely. "Keeping our godmother waiting is not an option—not if we all want to keep our heads on our shoulders."

Before Lycaon could do anything else, the intruder spun me around and rushed me away, muttering, "Can't take a hint, that one."

I checked over my shoulder, found Lycaon following us, fists clenched.

"And he still can't!" I wheezed, fright booming inside me again, making me stumble.

Powerful hands supported me at once, the man's mask-muffled voice as light as ever as he whispered in my ear, "Don't worry. There's no one alive I can't lose."

People blurred past as he had me almost running among the crowd. I thought we'd headed to the doors, then at one point I realized he'd plunged us into the mass of people on the dance floor.

After a while, as we weaved among the dancers, I snatched another frantic look around, and I could no longer see Lycaon anywhere.

Could it be he'd really lost him?

Before I could ask my strange companion, I noticed that I was draped in a black cloak.

I blinked up at him, baffled, and a light-colored eye closed in a wink within the mask. "I took the liberty of borrowing a guest's cloak."

"How? Why?" I mumbled dazedly.

He bent and a deep laugh echoed close to my ear. "The how is easily. As for the why, that magenta, while very becoming on you, is second only to red as a lure to the likes of your fanged friend."

I shuddered as I dragged the cloak around me tighter. "He's not my friend. I was trying to find a way to get away from him."

"I noticed. Thought I'd swoop in and be that way out for you."

My throat closed with expanding relief and disbelief. He'd noticed. When no one else had. And he'd chosen to intervene, when he must realize how dangerous Lycaon was.

When I could finally swallow past the lump of emotions, I rasped, "Thank you for ridding me of him."

"Don't mention it. Really, don't. I'm betting he has inhuman hearing." As I froze in dread, he shook his head and chuckled. "Kidding."

All my tension deflated, as for the first time in long months, I felt something I'd almost forgotten how to feel. Safe.

"Last I saw Wolfy, he was heading to the doors, where I wanted him to think we went," he said. "He's probably pursuing us to said eastern towers now. Our best bet is to stay in the midst of the dancers in case he comes back. And since we're here..."

He swung me around to him, and just like that, we were dancing.

As my feet moved of their own accord in the steps of the brisk dance he led me through, I looked up in stunned wonder, and finally got a good look at my savior.

Even without his fox mask, he'd be a head taller than me. And even in that bulky, dark-green coat, it was clear he was well-built. And strong, judging by how he'd pushed Lycaon aside, and caught me when I'd stumbled. Not to mention the hardness of the arms under my hands, even through the rough material of his coat.

Which, come to think of it, seemed out of place at such a ball, along with the rest of his outfit; a wrinkled, beige drawstring shirt, drab brown pants, and well-worn riding boots.

He stepped away to twirl me, and I sighed my pleasure as I rode the fluid movement. "Did you come here from a hunting trip? Or is this for the authenticity of your costume?"

"Is this your way of telling me I look scruffy?" Before I could splutter a denial, the man chuckled and spooled me back into his arms. "And you wouldn't be wrong. I had a long trip through the woods getting here—if not for the kind of hunt you're thinking of—and these were the most suitable clothes I brought with me. But now I think about it, they do give my fox costume that harried-after-a-harrowing-chase look."

Even with his voice muffled, I could listen to him talk all night. Then what he'd said replayed in



my mind.

Brought with him? And he had a long trip? So, he wasn't from here?

Could he be one of the men Leander invited?

My head spun at the possibility as he twirled me out again.

With my heart tripping over its own beats, I twirled back towards him myself, asking breathlessly,

“What brings you to this party, then?”

He cocked his fox's head at me. “I was invited.”

“I wasn't implying otherwise,” I rushed to say, then to adjust my question, “Invited by who?”

He checked around, then pointed to a table where my younger sister and brother, Esmeralda and Florian were chasing each other, and Leander, Bonnie and their friends lounged. Leander wore a papier-mâché, grey-wolf mask, Clancy, a satyr's head, goatee and horns included, while Jessamine, his pregnant wife, sported a half-mask with a beak for a nose. Bonnie, who must be unfamiliar with masked balls' requirements, had a massive pumpkin on her head, with an intricately carved, terrifying grin.

Not that I cared about what she wore or anything else at the moment.

This man was one of those Leander had invited for me!

But since I knew what each was wearing tonight, all except one, the one I hadn't seen yet, that meant this had to be him. The one who was the last to arrive, the best candidate.

He was the Grand Duke of Opona!

## CHAPTER FOUR



It took a lifetime of reserve—cultivated through endless scrutiny of my every action, and persistent suppression of my every impulse—to stop me from reaching up and snatching that mask off his head.

The urge still almost overwhelmed me. I needed to see the man who was my last hope for survival.

But since he was, more than ever I had to be on my best behavior. I had to win him over at all costs.

Among the clanging in my head, I heard his voice, forced myself to focus. “I’m sorry, what?”

“I was saying, it’s only fair that you tell me who invited you.”

I waved. “I didn’t need an invitation.”

“Oh, why’s that?”

I stared at him blankly. What had I just said?

I’d come intent on drawing my candidates out, hadn’t anticipated a reciprocated interest in the nobody I was posing as. I hadn’t prepared anything beyond a false name.

Now I didn’t know what to say that wouldn’t point to my identity. I wasn’t used to lying. The most I did was refrain from telling the truth of my opinion, offering rehearsed diplomacies instead.

Frantically, I searched for an answer that would have an element of truth, without exposing it. Just like the biggest and best liar I’d ever met used to do, Cyrus’s future queen.

Among her half-truths—when she’d been sent by the witch Nariman to infiltrate the Bride Search and steal the magic lamp—had been introducing herself as Lady Ada of Rose Isle, an obscure islet in Arbore. It was close enough to the truth, since she was from Hericeurra, or Ericura now, a forgotten Arborean colony thought lost to history. Even Lady Ada was almost a reversal of her very name, Adelaide.

Following her example, I now replied hurriedly, “My mother is the queen...” I paused before forcing out the fabrication, “...the queen’s lady-in-waiting.”

The man gave a small bow. “Well, milady, I’m going to need you to laugh very loudly, like I’ve just said the funniest thing you’ve ever heard.”

I gaped at him. “Why?”

“Just trust me. Laugh. Hard.”

“But I can’t.”

“Can’t what?”

“Can’t laugh, not on demand, certainly never in public. It’s poor manners.”

“Is that why you have such a long face?”

“Excuse me?”

He gestured over my head. “The horse mask, long face, get it?”

“Oh. Ha. Ha,” I snarked, then bit my tongue.

What was I doing, mocking him? I should be doing everything in my power to ingratiate myself to him. If he wanted me to laugh, I should laugh.

Then I opened my mouth and I found myself saying, “Ladies shouldn’t laugh, and if we do, we should cover our mouths, and keep it to a delicate chuckle, quiet enough to not be disruptive, but audible enough to flatter whatever clever quip our companion just made.”

He was the one who laughed heartily. “And here I thought you can’t laugh because you’ve broken your funny bone.”

My jaw dropped behind my mask. “There’s a funny bone?”

I could still hear the grin in his voice. “Two humerus bones, actually.”

“Humorous?”

“Humerus.” He spelled the word as he raised the hands on my waist to squeeze my upper arms. “These things. Ever slam your elbow and feel a charge shoot to your fingertips?”

“That’s what’s considered funny? What’s so funny about pain?”

“Pain is hilarious, as long as it’s inflicted on someone who deserves it.” Before I could say it would be vengeful, or appeasing, but not funny, he added, “Now let’s get you laughing. And don’t worry, I won’t tell your governess.”

“I really can’t laugh on command. Even if I could, I wouldn’t be able to tonight.”

There was a frown in his voice as he said, “What’s tonight?”

Only the most important night of my ever-decreasing lifespan!

“I’m here to make a good impression,” I mumbled.

He huffed with a shake of his head. “Clearly that worked a little too well, first with Wolfy, and now you have another relentless suitor following you. And there’s no more avoiding him.”

I looked to where he was gesturing, and found Björn waving at me wildly, and plowing through the dancers like a boulder thundering down a mountain.

Groaning, I remembered that I’d promised I’d let him know when we could go to the river later this evening. Knowing him, he wouldn’t take a quick answer and leave. He’d ramble on and drag me to eat some more, and interrupt this precious time with the Grand Duke.

The time my life literally depended on.

Panicking, I grabbed my companion by the arm. “We must get out of here!”

“We don’t need to,” he insisted. “That’s why I suggested you laugh. A lady laughing unreservedly at a gentleman’s diverting efforts is a sign that she favors him, and for all other suitors to step back.” He looked to the side where Björn had just knocked a couple off their feet, thankfully slowing him down, and shook his head. “At least I hope that mountain of a man follows those unspoken rules.”

“He doesn’t!” I almost wailed.

He snuck quick looks around, scoping out the area like a true fox would for an escape, before setting his hands on my waist. “Then let’s flee.”

Before I took my next breath, he lifted me up and swung me around flaring my skirt, clearing a circle through the throng of dancers. He kept swinging and twirling me until we made it off the dance floor. Then he grabbed my hand and tugged me after him, and we ran.

He kept looking back, making sure I was keeping up, oblivious to all disgruntled gasps and

growls as we plowed through the milling guests.

Then we burst through a set of open doors, leaving the ballroom behind, and crossing into the massive, adjoining terrace. We cleared all those who'd come out for fresh air, but he didn't stop until we reached the farthest spot overlooking the moonlight-soaked gardens spread before the sparkling city of Eglantine. After the stuffiness of the crowds, the night air carried a rousing chill, and the song of nightlife subdued the noise emanating from the ballroom.

As he turned to me, I swayed, and he steadied me against his strength, making my clammy body heat up further with a giddy flush.

He was now so close I could see past the hollows of his mask, and into his lively eyes. After the fire-tinged illumination of chandeliers, the blue-edged silver of the moonlight still made me uncertain what their color was. Whatever it was, it was clear and pure, and I wondered if the rest of him was as breathtaking beneath that mask.

Once he made sure I was steady on my feet, he released me and leaned on the marble balustrade.

Looking down at me, his imposing figure lit by the golden light seeping through the terrace doors, and the steel moonbeams peeking through the dark clouds above, he said, "So, what would it take for you to loosen up?"

This was one question I'd never thought I'd be asked.

I had nothing but the truth in answer. "I don't know. I'm wound up too tight, always have been."

"Then our goal tonight is to find a way for you to unwind."

"Heh. Good luck with that..." I stopped mid-grumble.

What was I *doing*? I was supposed to be sweet and charming and accommodating, not petulant, self-pitying, and confrontational.

Seemingly unaffected by my unfiltered responses, he rubbed his hands together. "I suppose I'll need that luck. Or as performers say, I'll need to break a leg."

"At least you won't be breaking one of your funny bones..." I stopped again, grimacing under cover of my mask, and exhaled. "Why do they say that, anyway? I've been told that before I entertained people, but I never understood why. Why tell an actor or a singer to break a leg?"

"Maybe because every performance has to have a cast?"

It took me a few seconds to get it. "Oh. Cast. Broken limbs. Ha-ha."

"You have to admit that was funny."

"That was yet another inane pun, not worth the roaring laughter you want me to muster..."

What was *wrong* with me? Where had my finesse and decorum gone? I couldn't even summon my princess-like manners anymore.

He still didn't seem to take any kind of offense as his voice turned teasing. "Since you're so focused on being proper, you should humor me. Use some of that charm that had mountain-man and that manimal chasing you like starving men would pursue a fleeing, juicy steak."

The absurdity of the image he painted, not to mention that word, wrenched an exclamation out of me. "Manimal!"

"It gets the meaning across better than shapeshifter or *therianthrope*, doesn't it?"

"It does, but it sounds—so silly."

"Most loan words do."

"Like what?"

"Like our friend the werewolf. This is literal Avongartan for 'man-wolf.' Same goes for mermaid—'sea-girl.'"

"What about sea-cow? Is manatee a literal translation for it?"

“Not that know of.” I could see the corners of his eyes crinkling. He had to be grinning. I bet he had a big, perfect smile. “But in some places, mermaid and manatee are the same thing. This came from the time before roads were established throughout the Folkshore, and trains were invented, and the fastest way to get somewhere was by sea—”

“That’s still the case.”

He just nodded, muffled voice sounding more amused. “But ships don’t wander aimlessly like they did before. Back then, men were stuck aboard for so long, they began to mistake manatees for mermaids.”

I gaped at him, horrified at what it must have taken to drive men to such hallucinations, but still unable to keep from giggling at that scenario.

He whooped. “There we go! We’ll get you chortling in no time.”

My hand instinctively shot to cover my mouth, only to smack into the mask’s muzzle.

He reached for it with a gentle hand, giving it a reassuring squeeze. “No one is watching you. Even if they were, and they could see you behind that mask, don’t worry about them. Just laugh. Be as loud as you want.”

Though I couldn’t resume laughing, I let out the pent-up breath I seemed to have been holding in for as long as I could remember. “Chortling is such a funny-sounding word, too.”

“Then whoever came up with it should be commended. I take issue with words that don’t match their meaning.”

“Like what?”

“Like our old friend the funny bone turning out to be a nerve. Or peanuts not being nuts.”

“They’re not?” I exclaimed.

He shook his head. “But they are similar to peas, so they have that small accuracy making up for it.”

“I now remember my mother once told me that walnuts weren’t nuts either, that they’re closer to dates.”

“I’m assuming you’re not referring to calendar dates.”

“Dates are eastern fruits that grow on palm trees...” I stopped as it hit me this could point to my identity. The common Arborean would have never heard of palm trees, let alone what fruit they bore.

The Grand Duke only hummed. “Interesting. You said your mother was the queen’s lady-in-waiting. Would that make her Cahramani as well?”

My lungs emptied in a rush of relief at his deduction. “Yes. Yes, that would.”

So this was how Ada must have felt! Whenever people went along with her lies, reaching their own conclusions, and unwittingly smoothing her path. Subterfuge was nerve-wracking, but it also had its satisfying moments.

Still, I must divert this back to him. “What about you, Mr....?”

“Call me Reynard.”

So he’d come ready with a false name, too.

*Two can play that game, Grand Duke Nikolai.*

But before I could press my question about his origins, and hopefully get a true answer, he added, “And you are?”

Disappointed that he’d swung this back to me, I mumbled, “Zafira.”

“Sounds like ‘sapphire.’”

“That’s exactly what it is,” I said, forgetting my disappointment, once again impressed by the versatility of his general knowledge.

“A brave decision on your parents’ part—not naming you after a flower.”

So he also knew of the custom to name Arborean girls after flowers, since Arbore was the “flower capital of the world.”

My father had wanted to name me after the fabled briar rose, to signify my rare birth—the first princess born to Arbore in seven generations. My mother had put her foot down, since he’d named Leander, insisting on continuing her family’s tradition of honoring Queen Zafira, by naming girls after gems and precious metals. She and my aunt Loujaïne were Emerald and Silver, respectively.

I was named Fairuza for the turquoise of my eyes, a stone that symbolized victory in Cahraman. Ironic, since I hadn’t had much of that in my life, not to mention my most recent and crushing defeat.

The final defeat could be two weeks away. If I didn’t secure my companion’s declaration of love. And I must. I would.

*If I could remember I should be impressing him, not the other way around.*

But it was impossible to be measured or calculating around him. It was all I could do not to blurt out the whole truth every time I opened my mouth.

For now, in response to his latest comment, I said, “It if helps, one of my middle names is Rose.”

“So how do you say ‘rose’ in Cahramani?”

“*Gol*,” I said, thickening my accent to stress the vowel. “Roses are important in both of my parents’ lands.”

“I’ve heard of rosewater being used in eastern sweets. Never got the chance to try any, though.”

“That’s a travesty!” I declared in mock-indignation. “I’ll bring you some myself, so we can rectify this shocking situation.”

“How generous of you.” He gave a deep mock-bow, before he straightened to gaze down at me. “Now we have one thing left to settle.”

“And that is?”

He poked me gently. “Getting a good laugh out of you.”

I instead fell mute, my every nerve jangling from the simple contact. Physical spontaneity was unknown to me, even with Leander and my parents. But in the past hour, Reynard, or Nikolai, had touched me more than I’d been touched all my life. And there had been nothing encroaching or exploitative in any of his gestures, like it had been with Björn and Lycaon. Every gesture had been protective, attentive, supportive—for me. About me.

Not much in my life had been for me or about me.

Throat tightening with the tears I hadn’t been able to shed since the day I’d realized I’d lost the Bride Search, and with it my assured salvation, I choked, “You don’t have to do that.”

“I’m afraid I have to. I’ve made it my business to get a good giggle out of you.”

“What if you can’t, hmm?” I dared him, my spirits suddenly soaring higher at an alarming speed. “I warn you—I’ve been told I have no sense of humor.”

He shrugged. “And I’ve been told I’m awfully persistent—especially if I encounter a challenging problem.”

“What if it’s a lost cause?”

“I still do what I can to remedy it.”

Like my heart was a night-blooming jasmine, it began to unfold beneath the moonlight, opening in elated disbelief. I hadn’t heard anything like this from any of the men who’d been brought before me.

Could it possibly mean he’d help me if he knew my problem? Could this mean that he was the one?

Heart fluttering in my throat, I probed again, “How does remedying a lost cause work exactly?”

“That depends on the cause. But in my experience, it requires some actions most would disapprove of for ‘ethical’ reasons.”

I frowned. “How else would you fix something, if not ethically?”

“Same way I rid you of the wolf-man who looked ready to swallow you whole. By manipulating the situation, with the help of some white lies and sleight of hand. Maybe even more than that, if need be.”

This somehow didn’t sit right with me. If I believed the end justified the means, I would have done anything it took to get rid of Ada. But I hadn’t. Even now I could end up paying with my life for that principle, I still stood by it.

“I do appreciate you coming to my rescue, beyond words,” I said tightly. “And thankfully, it only needed a mild form of subterfuge to extract me from his claws. But are you saying you would resort to any questionable methods, if the situation warrants it?”

He only shrugged. “To be honest, I don’t particularly care how things are done, just as long as they get done. You can debate the rights and wrongs after the issue is settled, not before taking action.”

“Like we are now?”

“Exactly.” He leaned back against the bannister, crossing his arms, clearly closing the subject.

I was about to argue some more, then I noticed how the material of his thick coat stretched over his broad shoulders and large arms. And just like that, all my misgivings evaporated into the cold night air.

What kind of palatial sport or military training created such a physique?

Enraptured by his form, my focus strengthened by my inability to examine his face, I instinctively reached out to touch his arm. “Another guest tonight told me I looked weak. How did you manage to become so strong?”

“I hunt a lot,” he said, like it was some personal joke. “It involves a lot of running, riding, and climbing.”

“Climbing?”

“Vantage points are important when it comes to shooting things.” He waved. “Enough about me, what about you?”

“What about me?”

“You implied earlier that you had some experience with theater? Or where else would you be told the phrase, ‘break a leg?’”

“I sing,” I explained. “Though my performances have been limited to sitting rooms. I never got to sing in a theater like my instructor did. She was an opera singer in her youth.”

“I used to sing as well. It’s why mother called me—” He stopped, stiffening. Before I could wonder why, he resumed his casual stance. “How come you’ve never tried singing in a theater?”

“You must know it’s improper for a lady to pursue a career in the arts. Or in anything else for that matter. I can only sing for select company, not for the masses, not even for paying gentry and nobles in the royal theater here in Eglantine.”

“You must not be very good then.”

I couldn’t resist the urge to smack his arm. “I’ll have you know I have a classically-trained voice with perfect pitch!”

“I’m joking! Though...” He stopped again, and I made a hurried “go on” gesture. “Well, you must wonder if you’re truly any good at anything if all you have are the opinions of people who feel obliged to flatter you.”

That was the whole point of the masks tonight, so the men I met wouldn't show me false personas as the king's daughter. So far, they had worked, perfectly. More than ever before, what I had seen of my candidates' true selves had been disheartening.

Except this one. From the instant he'd put himself between me and Lycaon, he'd been nothing but a surprise, showing all the traits becoming of the noble man he was.

Well, if you didn't count his willingness to engage in dishonorable measures...

His question interrupted that train of thought. "So, have you ever had unbiased or uninfluenced opinions before?"

"I was in a talent competition in another castle recently."

"And you won?"

I hadn't been able to discuss the Bride Search with anyone since my return. But though the memories still pained me, I found I wanted to share some with him.

I exhaled heavily. "No." He tilted his head at me and I blurted out, "But it had nothing to do with my singing. I did give the best performance."

"Then how did the winner win?"

I shuddered at the memory of that test meant to display our "worth" to the prince and judges. I'd sung my heart out, but Ada, who had no talents whatsoever, had scaled down the palace walls to save another competitor.

So Cherine Nazaryan had fallen over the wall because we'd gotten into a shoving match. I'd been scared out of my wits thinking she'd die, and had only wanted to run and hide. But after Ada had risked her life to save her, everyone had assumed I'd pushed her to her death on purpose.

Ada had ended up punching me in the eye for it—and still escaped elimination. The judges had decreed that worth was not synonymous with talent, and she'd showed her worth as a selfless savior.

Though I hadn't lost that day, had stayed in the competition, there was no doubt in anyone's mind who had really won that round. Ada.

It was *truly* hard not to hate her some days.

I finally answered him with a dull sigh. "She was totally devoid of accomplishments, but she performed some bumbling yet unexpected feat of heroism that swayed all in her favor."

He nodded. "That's the best way to win people over, not by being good at what you're doing, but by doing something different, memorable."

I let out an offended gasp. "That's the exact opposite of what I've always been told."

He raised placating hands. "I'm just relaying my experience, where I found 'good' is subjective—not to mention suffers in quality from the constraints of what is 'accepted' and 'proper.'"

"No, it does not," I exclaimed. "Good is good, bad is bad. Simple as that."

"If you experienced life outside this castle, you would know that nothing is ever that simple."

"I just told you I've been outside this castle! I even spent months practically imprisoned in—" I bit my tongue, afraid I'd just given my identity away.

It might be common knowledge by now that the Princess of Arbore had been in Cahraman, not just for the Bride Search, but during the coup that had followed it by Nariman and her genie. I'd remained her captive among all of Sunstone Palace's denizens during her reign of terror. I'd only returned after the kingdom had been restored, my uncle had abdicated, and my ex-betrothed had had his coronation.

Reynard returned my hurrying gesture. "Go on, I'm listening."

Exhaling in relief that he didn't seem to connect the dots, and bound on holding my tongue better, I shook my head. "It's a terribly long and boring story."

"Perhaps you could put it to song?" he suggested.



Before I could stop myself, I bristled, “Are you mocking me?”

“Not at all. Music always makes long, boring stories more palatable.” He poked me playfully. “Now *there’s* a way to be memorable—putting your experiences into tales, even tunes, that might outlive you.”

That would have been a lovely prospect, *if* I weren’t worried about butterflies outliving me.

I slumped against the bannister with a deflating exhalation. “My life isn’t interesting enough to warrant books or ballads.”

“I’m sure that isn’t true. You should try your hand at writing either or both about your long story. Maybe even an opera.”

Against all reason, my cheeks lifted into a wide, bashful smile that I heard in my voice. “I don’t have the material for an opera.”

“An operetta then. Isn’t that what the shorter version is called?”

I nodded, heart pattering in excitement for something that would never come to pass, because I was who I was, and my destiny was not mine to chart. “What would I call it?”

“Whatever you think exemplifies you. Exaggerate as much as you like.” He reached out and walked his fingers up the slope of my mask. “Cast yourself as a centaur, if it’s horses you like.”

I thought of my prized steed, my unicorn Amabel, gifted to me as a child, and meant as a luxury pet like my mother’s cats. I’d soon realized how cruel it was to keep her locked up, when all she wanted was to run and be free. I’d spent years sneaking her out of the stables, and training with her, until she’d become better than any race or show horse.

Regarding Reynard now, I wondered what Amabel would think of him. Unicorns were said to detect the pure of heart. She’d certainly judged everyone around me correctly. Her approval and friendship were a big part of why I believed myself essentially good, no matter how rotten everyone in Cahraman had thought me. One reason I wanted to survive was that she wouldn’t lose her closest companion.

I finally sighed. “Could I be a unicorn instead?”

“A literal horned-horse, or a girl who shifts into one?”

“A womanimal!” I said with a dry laugh.

He echoed my laugh more freely, stretching out his arms, as if encompassing the whole city below us. “I can imagine the reviews in the gazettes now. Come see the greatest tale of transformation ever put to the stage! *Womanimal: the Operetta!* An epic as short as Prince Jonquil’s regency.”

“But Prince Jonquil was regent throughout the five-year war.”

“That’s the joke—that the time he enjoyed public approval was shorter than the two hours’ span of your horsey operetta.”

That, of all things, was what finally cracked the dam of my polite reserve, and brought out a wave of nearly hysterical laughter.

He pumped the air triumphantly. “I knew I could do it!”

And for the next several minutes, we laughed until tears wet my cheeks, stitches beset my sides, and I could no longer draw breath.

When I finally quieted down, we stood staring at each other, breathing hard, snickers still escaping every few seconds.

“I knew you could do it,” Reynard said, his deep, muffled voice sounding so pleased.

I tightened the cloak he’d “borrowed” for me, starting to shake again with too many emotions to decipher. “I don’t expect I would do it again. I don’t even know what I found so funny.”

“It must have been hearing Prince Jonquil and public approval in the same sentence. But you

probably never heard of his transgressions, living in the castle.”

“I did hear of his mismanagement, which was to be expected. He wasn’t qualified to rule, as he was never meant to. The regent was meant to be the crown prince.”

His response was a derisive sound.

Though I wasn’t fond of Uncle Jonquil, he was still family, and I found myself defending him. “His ability to rule must have also been hindered by the wave of crime that swept the kingdom during the war. Bandits kept stealing the gold he collected, and I even heard that the one time he tried to speak to the people, his carriage was riddled by arrows, his party stripped, and left to return to the castle naked and on foot!”

Reynard snorted, as if he’d never heard anything so funny.

“Being targeted by criminals must have made conducting his duties impossible,” I persisted. “With the likes of that menace that keeps eluding capture—that robbing hoodlum—on the loose!”

He tilted his head at me. “Robin Hood, you mean?”

“Yes, that man! If he even *is* a man. I’ve heard so many strange and conflicting stories.”

Reynard nodded. “My favorite is the one about him being a hobgoblin.”

That was a story I hadn’t heard. So how did the Grand Duke of Opona know all this about Arbore’s wartime state, especially if he’d just arrived?

“You sure know a lot about our local problems.”

He shrugged. “Of course. I make sure to be informed about everything, wherever I go. Helps me make judgments of what issues are worth my attention.”

That was to be expected of a crown prince. Leander was very involved in our kingdom’s affairs, and the rest of the Folkshore’s general goings-on, as they ultimately impacted us.

“Where did you hear of what they call that robbing hoodlum?”

“Just traveling through a kingdom you hear a lot. I heard quite a variety of stories and some ballads about them.”

“‘Them’ meaning the hoodlum’s companions, or the theory that the actions ascribed to him are actually those of several different men?”

“Either or.” He sounded like he was smiling broadly, and I couldn’t help smiling, too, despite our small disagreement. His moods were strangely infectious. “Pick your favorite version, and add it to your list of stories to adapt for the stage.”

“Maybe I will. Any specific stories you’ve heard worth including in my masterpiece?”

“Plenty.”

“You should tell me all about them tomorrow, over tea perhaps?” I said, heartbeats tripping in anticipation.

His shoulders slumped, then he pushed off the bannister. “I’m afraid I won’t be able to do that. I’m not here to socialize.”

Panic spiked within me. Until I remembered that the suitors hadn’t been told that they were here for me, just for “opportunities.”

I took an urgent step towards him. “Whatever business you’re here for, be it trade or connections, I’m sure I can help you smooth out the process.”

For the first time tonight, he stepped away, putting more distance between us. “What I’m here for is a little more specific than that.”

“And what is that?”

“The girl I’ve been searching for.”

The whole world bated its breath for a long, exquisite moment. If my heart were a nightingale, this

would be the moment it burst into song.

That was why he was refusing to see “Zafira” again.

He was here for *me*.

Little did he know that he’d already found me. That he was the one I wanted. Even if my life didn’t depend on it.

“*There* you are!”

The shrill yell fell on my tingling nerves like a lash.

Meira. I had forgotten all about her, and about everything else.

Groaning inwardly, I made a staying gesture at him, before turning to run back to her.

“Do you have any idea what we went through looking for you?” she yelled again as she rushed towards me from the ballroom. “We thought that wolf-man ate you!”

I met her halfway, lifting my mask partially to grit between my teeth, “Go away, Meira. I’m in the middle of something important.”

“Well, nothing can be as important as the Grand Duke of Opona! He has finally arrived.”

“What are you talking about? He arrived long ago.”

“No, he didn’t.”

“Meira, I’ve been talking to him for a quite a while. See, he’s right—there...” I turned, pointing at Reynard—and found nothing but moonlight pouring over the spot where he’d been.

He was gone!

## CHAPTER FIVE



It was as if Reynard had disappeared into thin air. My handmaidens had insisted they hadn't seen him with me, so I'd armed them with his description, and sent them off looking for him.

It was a couple of fruitless hours of searching later when I'd finally gathered enough wits to realize Leander could find him for me.

I'd caught up with Leander when he'd been seeing off the last of our guests, pouncing on him with my breathless demands that he find Reynard.

Leander had looked down at me in total confusion, then had dismissed my hovering handmaidens, and gently led me to his quarters.

After listening to my account of the incredible man who'd saved me from Lycaon, and I'd thought the Grand Duke of Opona, Leander finally shook his head.

"It turns out the real Prince Nikolai, while here for a bride, it's not for himself. He wants you for one of his younger brothers, as it appears heirs to the Oponan throne are required to marry fellow mages, to ensure powerful magical offspring."

I stopped mid-pace, threw my hands up. "Who cares about him or his younger brothers or their magical offspring! I told you I already found the perfect candidate. Now all you have to do is find him for me!"

Leander exhaled, dropping onto a couch as I resumed pacing agitatedly. "You want me to find this man, who came out of nowhere, then vanished into thin air? The man no one else but you saw?"

"Are you implying I imagined him?" I turned on him, indignant.

"I'm only saying that your handmaidens didn't see you dancing with him, or talking to him outside. Then you turned, and he was gone. When you were on a terrace a hundred feet above ground. Not even magical people can do that so quickly, not without portals and elaborate spells."

"I'm not delusional, Leo! Wait—Lycaon can attest to his being real!"

Leander exhaled angrily, his eyes escaping mine as if in shame. "Lycaon is long gone. I was told too late of new information that made me realize I made a grave mistake inviting him. Thank the Fates you escaped his clutches before he had a chance to—turn you."

"Turn...? You mean he could have made me into a werewolf?" I squawked, my stomach turning with the remembered horror of my encounter with him. So I'd been right to be terrified of him.

Which also meant my gut instincts were as accurate about Reynard.

Leander began to apologize and I waved. "It's not important. I'm fine. Because the man who

saved me *is real*. And now you must find him for me.”

My intensity must have gotten to him, as he sat forward, the eyes that were so much like mine dead serious. “Apart from the facts that he was a little shorter than me, in good shape, was brave enough to go against Lycaon, and wore a fox mask, what else do we have to go on?”

I rushed closer, words falling over each other. “He was a foreign prince who just arrived in Arbore, through the woods, was in some kind of hunt—and he was here for me! He’s taken it upon himself to be thoroughly educated about my kingdom and its events, in preparation for the alliance of our lands, and he considered now to be the best time to ask for my hand, with the nation stabilized, and with me no longer engaged to Cyaxares!”

Leander stood up slowly, dawning hope erasing the grimness from his expression. “He said all that?”

I bit my lower lip hard. “Uh—not in so many words.” When disappointment doused Leander’s eyes, I stumbled on, “We were both pretending to not be ourselves, speaking in half-truths, but he said he was here for the girl he’s been searching for—which has to be me—I just know this has to be what he meant and I…” Breathlessness forced me to stop. I gulped air before I burst out, “Tell me you can find him!”

“You said he indicated me as the one who invited him. But I only invited the candidates, and he is certainly not one of them.” Tears of frustration bloomed in my eyes, and a frantic expression filled Leander’s. “Just tell me the facts that he said, not what you assumed he meant, and maybe I’ll be able to place him.”

I wracked my mind trying to remember what I’d left out. “He said he sang, and he did a lot of hunting and climbing. He gave me the name Reynard, but I didn’t think it was relevant, as I’m sure he made it up. But maybe it is one of his middle names, or his mother’s maiden name or something?”

Leander had gone stiff as I talked, now he blanched, like all blood had fled his face. “I know who you’re talking about.”

My heart stopped the moment his words sank in.

Then I flung myself at him, squealing in excitement. “Oh, Leander—that’s fantastic!”

He put me away with spastic hands, his face shuttered. “No—no, it’s not.”

“Why not?” I grabbed him back, seeking his averted eyes. “Leo, please, I’m certain he’s the one. I never felt this way about anyone. Talking to him came as easily as breathing, and the connection I felt —”

Leander cut me off. “Whatever it was, it can’t be the one you need. He isn’t.”

“Why not?” I cried out. “Why do you find it so hard to trust my instincts? I know what I felt! I’ve been in this curse’s chokehold for months, and the one time I felt it loosen its grip was around him.”

“He’s not a prince, Fay!” he suddenly shouted.

My heart kicked so hard, I felt it bruise.

I stared up at Leander helplessly as it thudded painfully, my mind scrambling for a way out.

“Maybe there can be some loophole! That once he marries me, he can become a prince!”

“If you were the crown princess, that would be the case. But the highest rank your morganatic husband can achieve is duke. He’d never be in line. He’d never be noble enough.”

“Then maybe Father can put a claim on Bonnie’s island of Ericura as a lost Arborean colony, and make us the king and queen of that land?”

“The curse says your savior has to be already the noblest of men.” I opened my mouth to protest, and he raised a hand. “And it’s not just that.”

“What else is there?”

“He’s unavailable.”

“Unavailable how?” I cried as I dug my fingers rabidly into his fisted hands, desperation blooming at the finality of his statement. “What’s more important than my situation right now? Anything else can wait.”

“Except the girl he’s been promised to since childhood.”

I dropped his hands, an ice-cold rush flushing through my veins. “No. No, he said he came here for...for...”

“For the girl he’s been searching for. The one he lost track of during the war.” Leander set a trembling hand on my cheek. “I’m so sorry, Fay, but you can’t have him.”

I tore his hand off my burning flesh with a shriek. “I can! I’m a princess! If I can’t have my pick of men, then who can?”

Leander’s face spasmed with a terrible twist of regret.

I grabbed his hands again, my tremors becoming wracking shudders, like I was out in the dead of winter in a soaking-wet gown. “He would do it. He would break off whatever arrangement he had with that girl, if he knew about my curse. We never told any other candidates, but we have to tell him. Just get him for me, have him propose and declare his love, and we can deal with anything else afterwards—*please*.”

And I broke down, blubbering like a helpless child.

But that’s what I was, and what I would remain until I was no more. In two weeks’ time, I was supposed to ascend into womanhood. But without him, I would only descend into oblivion, having never truly lived.

In the midst of the storm of misery, I was crushed against a heaving chest, then Leander’s deep voice singed my temple with its ragged promise. “I’ll do everything I can, Fay.”

I raised drenched eyes to him. “Promise me you’ll find him!”

He dropped a kiss on my forehead, then strode out of the room.

It was much later as I lay curled in my bed, tears long dried, that I realized something that made them flow freely again.

Leander hadn’t promised he’d find Reynard.

## CHAPTER SIX



I guessed it took impending death to change one's perspective.  
Who would have believed that my mother would bless my marriage to a magical being?

She'd come to join everyone in insisting I give Leander's candidates a chance to break the curse. She'd even finally told Esmeralda and Florian about it, trying to use the former's fury and the latter's tears to pressure me. With every minute counting down to my demise, even she had overcome her prejudice for a chance to save me. She could clearly cling to it in Leander's case because he'd already been saved.

But I'd refused, and my suitors had left.

I'd been so certain Reynard was the one, which meant Leander would find him, or he must come back.

But Leander hadn't returned.

Neither had Reynard.

Now one hour remained to the sunset of my eighteenth year.

I'd sent everyone away an hour ago, now sat at my window, as I had for the past two weeks, day and night. Waiting, praying, pleading to catch sight of galloping horses approaching the castle, bringing the one who would save me.

But there had been nothing. And now, it was too late.

It was over.

I wondered how it would happen. Would the Horned God come for me himself? Would he lead me away to the Underworld, or would he just touch me, and I'd be instantly transported there? Would it hurt? Would I be judged, and my eternal fate decided? Had I done enough in my life to deserve paradise or damnation? Or had I done nothing to merit either, and would just cease to be? If I had a choice, that would be my preference.

Finally leaving my window seat, I headed towards my bed. I'd lie there and wait. When it was time, I'd just...

Suddenly, all my hairs stood on end.

That sound. The galloping I'd been praying for.

My numbness evaporating in a blast of hope, I tore to the window. But the riders had already dismounted and were crossing through the front doors. I saw only the flapping edge of a green coat. Reynard...?

I started running towards my door, but halfway, I stopped, stood rooted. The hope was so brutal, it paralyzed me.

Minutes passed as I stared at the door, breathing shallow and heartbeats like an out-of-control train. The stomping footsteps grew closer, closer...

The door burst open and there he was.

Leander.

He froze the moment he saw me, and we stared at each other for three heart-bursting seconds, before the realization hit. He was wearing a green coat. And he was alone.

Tears of agonized frustration welled in Leander's eyes, matching my own. "I couldn't find him. When he disappears no one can find him. I'm so sorry, Fay. I wish—I wish..."

His panting choked into silence. And my own chokehold was back, an invisible pressure around my throat, strangling any words I could have mustered, letting nothing but horrified wheezing escape my trembling lips.

I was going to die. I was going to die and there was nothing that could be done about it.

Reynard hadn't been the one.

Reeling with the terrible letdown, my urge to flee from this cruel, pointless fate propelled me to tear out of my brother's shaking hands as he reached for me, out of the room I'd spent my life in.

I no longer wanted to end it there.

Leander yelled my name as he pursued me, but the sound of my thundering heart overtook all other senses as I ran, and ran.

I spiraled down every flight, the castle blurring by, until I flew past alarmed guards, through the gardens, and towards the stables.

Hot tears almost froze as they streamed off my aching face. My feet screamed in their flimsy slippers, a stitch tore through my left side, and my throat burned with the snatched gasps of frosty air in between lung-tearing sobs.

Hearing the exclamations of the stablehands as if coming from another world, I burst into my steed's stall. Next thing I knew I was sitting on Amabel's back while she kneeled, grabbing handfuls of her silvery mane, urging her up.

With a whinny and shake of her horned head, Amabel rose, my desperate kicks to her sides launching her into a thundering gallop.

Tearing through the gates, the wind slapping in my unbound hair, and freezing my face, the stomps of Amabel's hooves kept furious tempo with the bruising beat of my heart as we rode right towards the setting sun.

The invisible noose of the curse tightened, making drawing breath a struggle. I screamed with all that was left in me, of futility, of fury, railing against its unfair cruelty. I had to escape it, outrun Death. It couldn't end like this. I hadn't started living yet!

But no matter how fast we galloped, there was no stopping the sky staining with an ominous gradient of bloody oranges and angry purples, ushering in the end of my last day.

Then the sun started dipping fast behind Sherwood Forest as it sprouted from the horizon, and with it seeped my last wisps of strength.

Breathing became impossible and numbness settled into my bones, loosening my grip on my unicorn, melting me off her back.

Indigo twilight started to fall, and so did I, into the arms of darkness.

I never felt the ground.





THROUGH DARK MIST, CLUSTERS OF IMAGES FORMED.

I floated from one instance to the next, twirling through nebulous backgrounds as haziness gave way to clarity.

Below me, a castle made of ice cracked open to display dozens of broken mirrors, with two figures dancing in the midst of the shards—a crystalline man and a wooden girl with fiery hair. As I passed them, they dissolved into a silver liquid that rose, crested, corroding all it touched, melting the walls and collapsing the ceiling, revealing what lay beyond.

Under a blazing summer sun, an emerald-green sea sparkled, and burning ships sank under a wave that soared high enough to brush the sky. In its retreat, it bared the sand beneath, where a girl with a fish's tail screamed voicelessly at someone aiming to stab a bull-horned man with a golden trident. When the wave crashed upon the golden shore, they were gone and the waters turned the red of wine—or blood.

The landscape morphed, the gold of the sand becoming that of wheat fields, the green of the sea turning to that of grassy hills. The land streaked past me as I followed a blonde girl rushing by houses with red-tile roofs, fields full of wild horses, grazing livestock, and barns with multi-colored cats. Her speed caused the smaller details to blur as the sun moved across the sky, giving way to a full moon that grew impossibly larger.

As the moon descended upon the earth, the land shattered under the brunt of massive antlers surfacing from beneath. Billowing purple smoke masked the entity's massive form as it rose to grab the girl by the ankle and drag her below. The moon screamed.

As the land withered and the fields turned grey, the scene streaked to a still, eerie forest.

Brittle morning rays seeped through the mist, sparkling off dewdrops that hung like crystal beads on silvery cobwebs spread across twisting black trees. Birds sang along with the calm tune of the whistling wind, and the sounds of a rushing river and rustling leaves joined the melody.

The music of nature compelled me to dance through the forest, singing along as I twirled into a crossroads surrounded by glowing, blue mushrooms.

A deep voice joined mine, and hands grasped my own from behind. Our duet filled the air, making pink flowers bloom on the black trees.

Joy filled my heart as my partner swayed me down a path that seemed to have no end, but I was content to let him lead me onward. Looking up, I sought out his eyes—and found none.

He had no face.

“Who are you?” I asked breathlessly.

I could feel the vibration in his chest against mine, an answer making its way to his lips. Then he spoke, and it wasn't in words, but hard knocks.

The knocking grew louder, and the dream disappeared in a glittering burst.

I came to with a flutter of eyelashes.

What had happened? Where was I?

I gazed out into a long, stone-walled room with stained-glass windows and a pitched ceiling. In my line of sight, I only saw one oaken table spread with a dozen cylindrical candles in various stages of melting, and a silver incense bowl. I could scent the burning myrrh and wax, but my sense of smell felt off. Like I had a cold.

Whispers carried from the open door at the end of the room. I headed towards them, barely

feeling my body or feet, like they'd fallen asleep. Nebulous memories of falling off Amabel made me wonder if I'd hit my head hard, or been given a powerful pain-killing potion.

As I slowly neared the door, I could see two men standing outside with their backs to me—Leander and his friend Clancy.

"You're sure this place is safe?" Leander sounded hoarse, like he had yelled until he'd lost his voice.

"No one but those we direct here will find it," Clancy assured him.

"But—"

Clancy spoke over Leander's objection. "I myself forgot this place existed until I returned from Rosemead and reviewed my assets."

"Yes, but what if—"

Clancy still wouldn't let him voice his worries. "You yourself saw how, even with maps, it was still hard to find. No wonder, since it was built in the time of King Herla, when Arbore was several kingdoms, and the Bryar King made it his stronghold."

"It does look like a throwback to the Middle Ages," Leander conceded reluctantly. "And I suppose there's nothing here to steal but old weapons and rusted silverware anyway. But if word gets out that—"

Clancy drowned his words again. "I'll have my most trusted people checking in regularly, and have escorts to those you send. Word won't get back to Eglantine, I assure you."

I came up behind them. "Word about what? Where are we?"

They ignored me. I'd barely heard my own voice. It was a weak rasp as if I hadn't spoken in days. How long had it been since I fell off Amabel?

Leander let out a despondent sigh. "I'm not sure if I have anyone left to send, but I have to keep searching."

"I know you will." Clancy ran a hand through his curly auburn hair, sounding as dejected. "Any idea where else you can find more eligible royal heirs?"

Leander slumped against the wall. "There are nations across the Silent Ocean we've only heard of. And there's a whole empire south of Cahraman. They must have a few imperial descendants to spare. Also, my great-uncle, the King of Orestia, has an heir who's been wandering the Folkshore. He was last seen in Zargoun, and there's news that he might be returning home soon."

"That's another lunatic who claims to be the son of a god, right?"

Leander nodded. "But beggars can't be choosers, and at this point, I will beg like the dog I nearly became."

"So you're still looking for candidates for me?" I interrupted, a little stronger this time.

Once again, they made no response as Clancy only exhaled. "But how can he be the king's heir if he's a demigod?"

"Eleutherius had no sons, so Theoneus is his eldest daughter's son, allegedly by Eurycrius."

Clancy whistled softly. "Not just any god, but the king of the gods."

Leander shrugged. "Like that's a rare occurrence. We've all heard the stories of Eurycrius's fondness for mortal women." After a beat, he added, "Bonnie is also still trying to find Keenan."

"No one has seen him since he went after Ella in the Winter Court?" At Leander's head shake, Clancy hummed, "He would be perfect—if he wasn't crazy."

"Everyone in the Autumn Court is crazy by our standards."

"I guess. But until you get a hold of this wandering demigod relative of yours, or Bonnie's crazy fairy cousin, we should look into alternative solutions."

“Because these worked so well for us before?” Leander said bitterly. “The Spring Queen practically slammed the door in our faces.”

Clancy set a hand on Leander’s arm with a brittle smile. “We’ll find something.”

“I just pray whatever it is isn’t too late.” Leander pushed off the wall with a heavy exhalation, and started to move down the hallway.

Irritation sparked through the fog filling my head. “Leo, what is the matter with you? Why are you ignoring me?”

Paying me no mind, the two men continued walking away.

Head swimming, I went after them. “If you’re angry I ran, I’m sorry. I was distraught and couldn’t bear the news, but this is getting ridiculous! Talk to me—” I reached out to grab Leander...

...and my hand went right through his arm.

Staggering to a stunned stop, I stared after them as they disappeared down spiraling stairs, leaving me behind with their echoes.

Was I still dreaming?

But this didn’t feel like that dream. This felt real. Even if I couldn’t touch Leander, he’d looked and sounded real...

A whimper from behind me made me spin around. There was something in this room with me. Someone.

Slowly, I retreated through the room, that numb weightlessness persisting, like I was wading through a pool of murky water. As I approached the shadowy end where a four-poster bed draped in a canopy came into view, thoughts moved at a snail’s pace, trying to piece together the shards of my most recent memories. I had no recollection of what happened between falling off Amabel, and waking here, unseen, and unheard.

But I somehow knew what was in the bed before I laid eyes on it.

My body.

## CHAPTER SEVEN



How long I hovered by my own bedside, I couldn't tell. The sun rose and fell, again and again. Shadows shifted along the room, birds sang with the sunrise, and wolves howled in the night, and I hovered. Watching the Fairuza who lay on the bed, mirroring the emotions roiling through me, like she was caught in the clutches of unending nightmares.

But this wasn't a dream. This was the fate that awaited me into eternity.

I'd always known there was a possibility the amendment one of my fairy godmothers had made to the curse might work. That instead of death, I would fall into an unnatural slumber. One that also could only end by the love of the noblest of men. She'd made it to keep the Underworld from claiming me when the curse expired, to give me more time to be saved.

But watching my own chest rise and fall and feeling its every move echo within my ethereal projection among that distressing numbness, I'd long admitted to myself the horrifying truth.

Only my body had succumbed to the curse's amendment. My consciousness was wide awake and going madder with every waking minute.

I didn't have the respite of sleep, or the mercy of company. Those who came to check on my sleeping body, remained unaware of my presence. And then even those had stopped coming.

So I hovered by my body in endless helplessness.

At one point, the sound of voices finally prompted me to move from my body's side.

It wasn't more of Clancy's people. Those had always come right up, ironically talking in hushed whispers, as if afraid to wake me. The new voices remained outside, raised in argument.

I didn't know how far I could leave my body, but I rushed to the window, hoping there might be someone among the newcomers who would see me.

It was early daytime and the faint pitter-patter of rain drummed on the windowpanes as I peered down the soaring tower of a castle.

The moment I saw the Oponan royal party, something akin to hope moved within my numb chest.

Without a second thought, I was running outside the room and down the spiral stairway.

It felt like it took too long before I was passing through the castle's main door. For moments everything disappeared, then I was outside.

Still rattled, I approached the party, and saw a handsome man who must be the real Grand Duke of Opona.

Standing in drenched riding clothes, his short, golden hair plastered to his head, Nikolai was

arguing with a darker, bearded man, who had a curved sword strapped to his side. Perhaps his personal guard or a knight?

“I don’t know why you’re still arguing, Ivan,” Prince Nikolai snapped.

“Because it’s not too late to change your mind, Your Highness!” Ivan retorted.

Prince Nikolai waved. “Her curse won’t transfer to any of us.”

“We really don’t know that. It might be why they have her hidden here, that they’re afraid it might.”

Prince Nikolai tutted. “Fairies are vicious tricksters, but this is just a petty curse to be broken with a kiss. Either Andrei or Igor will wake her.”

Looking back at their convoy, wondering if either of his younger brothers were here, I found a wagon hitched to his carriage, bearing a glass coffin.

Was that for me?

Nikolai pointed at it, affirming my suspicion. “We’ll just put her in there, and take her home with us. Then either of them will marry her, and we will finally have a connection to the West.”

Ivan wrung his hands at his prince. “It’s an admirable plan, Your Highness, but surely we can still find a better princess? This one is as good as dead.”

He wasn’t wrong. I actually thought I was worse than dead.

But Prince Nikolai was here with a plan to reverse this. To save me.

If only there was anything I could do to help him. But I could only stand there and hope that Ivan didn’t end up dissuading his liege.

So far, he hadn’t, as Nikolai insisted, “If we have to resort to a light form of necromancy, we will. I came all this way to establish unprecedented, and necessary ties with the West, and I’m not leaving without them. Now, stop stalling and go collect her body.”

Ivan finally gave up, his shoulders slumping. “As you wish, Your Highness.” Then he beckoned to two other men to follow him.

I followed the three men, looking forward to returning to my body via the door they’d open. But they barely set foot on the castle’s threshold, when the ground rumbled and shook, knocking them back.

We all watched in shock and awe as giant, black briar thorns tore the ground and shot up, blocking the door. In the span of the next few breaths, they spread to encase the whole castle in an impenetrable shield of sharp, twisting vines.

Snapping out of his shock, the knight unsheathed his sword and slashed at the enormous thorn bush, with the other two joining in, to no avail.

Ivan finally stopped, panting harshly, “Is this part of the curse?”

Nikolai gazed up at the castle in baffled frustration that mirrored my own. “It could be some sort of test.”

“This is no doubt fairy magic,” an older man, who’d remained by the glass coffin said, “Perhaps Ivan was right, and we shouldn’t get involved?”

“We did not come all the way here to be scared off by some vines.” Nikolai unsheathed his sword, and beckoned for the rest of his party, and they all joined the other men.

But it was useless. Every strike only seemed to strengthen and increase the vines, until the castle all but disappeared beneath their lethal tapestry.

Afterwards, Nikolai attempted casting spells to make the vines retreat into the earth. Then he summoned a storm to tear them away, and even set them on fire.

Nothing worked. That thorny barrier was here to stay.

But the men were not.

By nightfall Prince Nikolai had given up and ordered his men to move out.

As they rode away, I heard the knight assuring Nikolai that they'd stop in Orestia, find that other troubled princess whose family would gladly be rid of. One who was wide awake, and only had a mad father.

In ever deepening dejection, I passed through the thorn-encrusted door, floated back to my body, and continued my wait.

For what? I couldn't tell.



DAYS PASSED WITH ME LINGERING IN A DISSOCIATIVE STATE.

To combat the maddening monotony and isolation, I started exploring the castle. I'd come to realize I could move away from my body within its confines. I examined every nook and cranny, over and over, fixating on the catacombs and the centuries-old remains within. Anything to escape the fact that I had been torn out of my body, and robbed of my ability to feel, to be seen or heard.

Then it finally sank in.

I was no longer a person, but the resident ghost of a rundown castle.

This was my afterlife. And there was no end in sight.

Whenever voices approached the castle, I no longer bothered going outside to see who they were, or how they fared. I knew how it would end. They all failed to bypass the thorn barrier, and left in frustrated defeat, leaving me to sink into yet deeper fathoms of despair.

Why couldn't my fairy godmother have just left the curse alone, and let me die in peace? Her amendment hadn't saved me, it had cursed me twice over.

At some point, I tired of haunting the castle, cycled back to the room where my body lay, asleep and untouched by time.

In spite of my body's restless slumber, the turquoise silk dress with the chiffon pink skirt overlay, that my ghostly form mirrored, was unwrinkled. I hadn't gotten thinner, or paler, and my hair hadn't become oily or disheveled. My skin only had the scent of the delicate lavender soap I'd last used. There wasn't even the faintest layer of dust on me.

The curse was perfectly preserving me, like I was a morbid trophy, a breathing, suffering taxidermy.

As I helplessly watched my face twisting and my body twitching, something occurred to me.

If my body was mirroring the misery I was experiencing, could I possibly control it at will? Could I move it up and out of bed? Maybe I could sleepwalk it out of here. Maybe the thorns only stopped people from entering, but if I could bypass them, I could walk my body all the way back home, so I could be with my family.

But if they were keeping me here, did that mean they really didn't want me around? They hadn't even appointed someone to keep watch over me.

Anger, outrage, helplessness, frustration, and desperation all collided into one long, furious scream that only I heard filling the room.

My body only made a whimpering sound. I mimed a yanking move with all my strength, but it barely moved. I tried again, and again. The most I managed was to make my body move the covers a bit down my torso. I wouldn't be puppeteering it back to Eglantine any time this century.

“This is hopeless,” I wailed, the echo of my real heart thundering, my no-longer-there lungs choking hoarsely on a phantom breath. *“I’m in hell!”*

And this was where I’d remain forever.



I STARED OFF INTO SPACE, PROBABLY FOR DAYS ON END.

Other days I watched rain sliding down the windowpanes, like the tear tracks I wished I could still feel running down my face.

The hypnotic rainfall was the only relief I had, the one thing that lulled my churning mind and heaving soul.

Suddenly, I couldn’t even have that anymore.

Something was interrupting the storm’s steady fury. Erratic sounds, like something scratching at stone, chipping away at my daze.

The persistent sounds finally snapped me back to clarity, ears focused. And what I heard had treacherous hope rising in spite of everything.

Those sounds were right outside my window!

Somebody had managed to bypass the thorns, and climb all the way up here.

*Someone had finally come for me.*

The scratching grew louder, followed by a frustrated groan, and a string of unintelligible curses.

Rooted beside my body in the shadows, anticipation echoed my heartbeat in my throat as I fixed unblinking eyes at the window, praying, *“Please, please, please.”*

The noises grew louder, then I saw a gloved hand grip the ledge outside the window, pulling up a hooded head into view.

Pulling back his fist, the man smashed the windowpane in a cacophonous crash that made me jerk. Then he heaved himself up and swung inside.

He landed in a fluid crouch, his cloak spread around him like a shadow, water slipping off the green material in fat droplets.

When he stood, I thought he was the best sight I’d ever seen. Tall, and broad, and strong. At last, one of the candidates Leander had sent after me had the persistence and skill to circumvent the curse’s barricade.

He had to be the one!

Now he would approach my body, see how perfect I looked in repose, and he would declare his love. His kiss would wake my body from its deathly slumber, and reclaim my spirit from its hellish exile.

But—he didn’t approach.

His gaze barely touched the shadows where I stood as he massaged his wrists before moving to scan the rest of the room. Then with a shake of his head and a huff, he ran out of the room.

Where was he *going*?

Stunned disbelief gave way to alarmed pursuit as I whooshed through the door he’d slammed behind him, tailing him down the tower and throughout the decrepit castle.

He stopped at every chamber to search every closet, humming a tune under his breath, one that was familiar, but whose origins eluded me.

What was he *doing*? Did he think I was being kept in a closet? Was that why he hadn’t even

looked around my room, when he'd found none? Was he that dumb he didn't think to investigate the canopied bed in the far corner, didn't get the simple concept of "Princess Sleeping in a Tower?"

By the time we reached the second floor, I'd had it with him checking impossible places for me. I floated in his wake, fists clenched, wishing to be solid for only seconds, so I could punch him in his thick head.

Then at the end of one corridor, he let out a triumphant, "Aha!" and rushed through the door bordered by rusting, cobwebbed suits of armor, one with its mace-bearing arm lying at its feet.

Outrage washed over me as I watched him pick up the weapons inside, examining them, muttering reports on their condition and usefulness. Then he produced a folded leather bag from his cloak, and crouched to pack the crossbow he'd selected, followed by an axe and an assortment of daggers.

He wasn't here for me. He was here to rob the castle's armory.

"Unbelievable," I bristled as I stopped over him, my exclamation ringing off no walls, never to reach his ears. That was the one good thing about this state, that I could rant at any volume and tone, and not be judged for it. "I wait here for who knows how long for someone who can cross those abominable thorns, and you finally show up, only to show more interest in the clutter than the treasure!"

Gripping a handful of arrows, he'd gone very still. Then he slowly turned his hooded head in my direction.

Had—had he heard me?

I halted my tirade as he stood up, mirroring my uncertain pose, his unseen face within his hood directed exactly where mine was.

Could he see me?

My heart bounded, feeling almost like I was in direct possession of it again as we stood there, facing each other for nerve-wracking moments.

Then he reached a hand towards me, and his gloved fingertips attempted to touch my arm, only to go through it.

He dropped the arrows with a clatter, flying back with a shout.

"GHOST!"



## CHAPTER EIGHT



“*No. Wait!*”

My frantic yell only made him swoop down to grab his bounty, then spring up and shoot away.

I flew after him, yelling at the top of my non-existent lungs, “Don’t go! Please! You can’t leave me here!”

He kept running at a speed I almost couldn’t keep up with in my disembodied state. My desperation rose as the distance between us widened.

He’d be out of the castle in minutes. Then no one else would ever be able to get in again. I’d be alone forever.

“If you leave, I’ll—*I’ll die here!*”

Even as the scream exploded from me, I knew it was even worse than that. If he left me, I’d never die, never get released from this nightmare.

And it was no use. He’d already disappeared around the corner.

Despondency slowed me down, the letdown too brutal to bear.

Suddenly, approaching footsteps made my head snap up. He was coming back towards me!

I watched him approaching in confusion, hands clasped as if in prayer. “Are—are you back for me, or are you lost?”

He stopped a dozen feet away, cleared his throat, his voice deep and hushed. “What did you mean ‘you’ll die here’? You’re already dead.”

I shook my head. “I’m not.”

He cocked his hooded head, and it was unnerving, being unable to see his face, especially his eyes. “Then what are you, ghost girl?”

“I’ll show you.” I backed away, beckoning for him to follow.

He looked around, then dropped his shoulders with a sigh, muttering, clearly to himself, “This is a bad idea.”

Despite that, he followed me, making the drowning hope within me bob up to the surface for a gasp of air.

All the way up to the tower, I anxiously checked behind me, making sure he was still there, and wondering what about him was familiar, like the song he’d been humming.

As we entered the room, I pointed to the canopied bed on the platform at its far end. “You didn’t notice me when you first arrived.”

He approached the bed with caution, then pulled the curtain aside.

Inhaling sharply, he looked from the body on the bed to me as I hovered beside him.

He looked back at my body, then bent to draw a knife out of his boot.

Instantaneous fear gripped both versions of me. Instead of a savior, I could have led a killer to my vulnerable body. And there was nothing I could do to stop him if he wanted to hurt me.

He bent towards my body, and hovered the blade over my mouth.

“Don’t!” I rasped brokenly.

My body echoed my distress with a whimpered contortion.

He straightened, then showed me the fogged-up blade. Evidence of my breath. “You’re certainly not dead.” I shuddered with the expended fright as he pointed the knife at me. “I think this is you dreaming.”

“I’m awake. I’m *too* awake.”

He regarded me for a moment before he asked, “How long have you been here?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted. “I don’t even know where here is.”

His posture relaxed as he gestured out the broken window. “You’re in Briarfell—specifically, the old Bryar fortress in the woods.”

“King Herla’s castle?” I frowned, vaguely remembering what Clancy had said the day I’d awoken here. “Where he lived before he went to Faerie for centuries?”

“Yes, exactly. Do you have any idea what happened before you became...this way?”

Now I thought about it, I couldn’t tell him the truth. This was a stranger who’d broken into this castle to loot it, not a nobleman sent by Leander.

But like Ada, I could tell a half-truth. “Last I remember, I was riding my horse and fell, then I was here.”

He nodded as he came closer. I still couldn’t see his face within the shadow of his hood, its depths inexplicably dark. But I felt him squinting at me. “Do I know you?”

“Perhaps if you took off your cloak, I could tell if we’ve met.”

He chuckled dryly. “Nice try. But the greater mystery isn’t who you are, but *what* you are. I’ve seen and heard a lot of strange things, but you are one of the strangest. You’re the last thing I expected to find when I decided to come here.”

“And why did you?”

“Because I heard that this castle had erupted in gigantic thorns. I had to come see what the fairies were guarding, or hiding, that could be of use.”

“How do you know it was fairies?”

He scraped the back of the knife against his unseen jaw, eliciting the rasp of a stubble. “Sorcerers don’t have this much sway over the earth’s magic, not to mention the concept of a thorn gate is very reminiscent of the Spring Court. Or so I’ve heard.”

Of course. The thorns must be another manifestation of the Spring Queen’s curse, a retaliation for having it amended, making it impossible for any savior to reach me. None of those sent my way had been able to bypass the thorny barrier.

Now this bandit had. The only one who hadn’t come for me at all, and probably the last man on the Folkshore who could be described as “the noblest of men.”

But he was the only one who could see me.

What did that mean for me now?

“You must be comatose from that fall off your horse,” he reasoned, talking more to himself. “But what could have made you a ghost, if your body still breathes?”

“I’m *not* a ghost.”

He leaned against one of the bedposts. "If you're not a ghost, and you insist this is not your dream-self, then what are you? An apparition?"

"I'm not sure what I am, but we both know I'm not dead."

"Maybe you're half-dead?" he suggested. "A disembodied soul of sorts, halfway to the afterlife."

A cold spill of horror drenched me. "Is there such a thing?"

"I've heard stories of lost souls, who either end up in a limbo between life and death, or linger here, in time becoming true ghosts, or worse, poltergeists."

Every possibility out of his mouth blasted away whatever remained of the hopeless daze I'd been in since I awoke in this castle. I discovered it had actually been protecting me from utter despair.

It hadn't occurred to me there could be a limited time for me to be asleep, that I could eventually become totally detached from my body. I could die regardless of the fairy godmother's curse amendment.

Worse, I could become something eternally tormented, or even evil.

I should have never left Cahraman. I should have just let those ghouls eat me, or drowned in that flooded shrine in Mount Alborz. At least that would have been an active death, while I was fighting something, not stuck in this accursed state until I faded, or became a malevolent spirit haunting this run-down castle.

My body began to thrash in response to my horror, and he waved his hands in my face. "Hey, calm down!"

The urgency of his tone only furthered my slide down the spiral of panic. I squeezed my eyes, hands going to my neck, suffocating for the air I no longer breathed...

Suddenly, the world shook violently, and I felt something I didn't think I'd ever feel again. The pressure of fingers on my arms.

Snapping my eyes open, I found the hooded man shaking my sleeping body, snapping me out of my descent into hysteria.

"Whatever you're thinking, stop it," he ordered tersely. "You're giving yourself an anxiety attack."

"A what?" I slurred breathlessly, running my hands over my arms, where I could feel the indirect touch of his hands.

"Like a heart attack, but less lethal, and spurred by your mind rather than any physical issues." He carefully laid my shivering body down, adjusting my head on its pillow, then fully turned towards me. "It's common among soldiers. I've seen many instances in the war."

"You fought in the war? Which side?"

"Which side?" he laughed incredulously. "Do I sound Avongartan?"

"Accent is no indication of nationality these days. Many are encouraged to be polyglots."

"Well, Mysterious Dreamer of the Woods..." He tapped my body's limp hand. "...I'll have you know that I, like any Arborean man between the ages of sixteen and forty, was off fighting in His Majesty's army. I spent the war being sent back and forth between guarding the borderlands and fighting on the frontlines."

"Oh." I nodded slowly, calming down as I watched the gloved hand set over my own. I could feel it, like I still felt the echoes of his grip on my arms.

This was the most I'd felt in ages. Since that night I'd been with...

No. I wouldn't think of Reynard. I couldn't afford more confusion and frustration and hopelessness.

Shaking my thoughts back to this moment, I took hold of my incorporeal dress and curtsied. "Thank you for your service."

He snorted, bowing in turn. "It was my duty, milady. For King and Country—and all that nonsense."

"Nonsense!" I exclaimed, mind snapping fully to him, ready to launch into a tirade on my father's behalf. "It is an honor to serve the king, and to protect our land from our enemies!"

He huffed. "Indeed. And while thousands of us followed His Majesty to war, risking our lives for the safety and prosperity of Arbore, we left it in the hands of scum like Prince Jon, who oppressed the people, and almost destroyed the kingdom from within."

It was treason to talk about any member of the royal family this way. But this was the second time I'd heard allusions that Uncle Jonquil had not merely failed to lead our kingdom in my father's absence, but had actively abused his power.

And this man wasn't alluding to it, but directly condemning Uncle Jonquil. So could this be a universal opinion of him? Had he been as bad as claimed?

Even if so, this man was a thief! He was the last person to condemn others.

"Who are you to judge," I snapped. "You came to rob this place."

"Who am I?" he scoffed. "I'm the man who spent years of my youth fighting to keep our kingdom safe, only to find out the man charged with protecting those we left behind was subjugating them instead." He gestured to his bag of lethal loot. "And what if I'm robbing what hasn't been of use to anyone in centuries, but will help save someone in danger? Tell me again how I compare to Prince Parasite."

I gaped at him. Regardless of how corrupt my uncle might be considered, he was still a prince. And as regent, he'd had the divine right of kings. If he'd misused his power, so had many princes and kings across the continent before him, and would after him. He might have also had reason to, and I was hearing only one side of the story. The noblest of men couldn't, and shouldn't, be judged by the same standards as everyone else.

I folded my arms on my chest, glaring at him. "Say what you wish. People will remember Prince Jonquil, for better or for worse. They will not remember you."

He laughed. "Oh, they will. They're already committing my exploits to song and sonnets, ballads, and books, and I hope that, throughout the ages, I will always be the bane in Prince Jon's narrative."

And with those last words, that confusing familiarity I'd been feeling towards him finally crystalized. I hadn't seen him before. But I'd heard enough descriptions to recognize who he was.

I stabbed a finger at him accusingly. "You're that robbing hoodlum, the prince's thief!"

He threw out his arms, as if to present himself to me. "I prefer Robin Hood, Prince of Thieves."

## CHAPTER NINE



After hearing about that robbing hoodlum for years, the conflicting reports of his appearance, actions, nature as man, beast, or a host of copycats, he stood before me in the flesh. Here of all places. Far more striking than the stories had ever portrayed. And *so* proud of his infamy.

I said so, and he only chuckled again. “A man takes pride in his accomplishments, and it is an impressive reputation—even if it doesn’t really do me justice.”

“You—you...” My offended splutter made him laugh harder, which in turn made me sneer, “Of course, it doesn’t. You must have committed too many crimes to document. Like this latest heist that no one would find out about. Though you miscalculated your potential loot this time, since there’s no treasure here.”

He waved dismissively. “I don’t care for treasure.”

“Sure, that’s why you regularly robbed all those noblemen, clergymen, and the prince regent.”

“I did it to give money back to the peasants they overtaxed!” he growled, losing all nonchalance. “People lost their defenders to the king’s cause, which made them easy prey for that vulture, to do with as he wished. But I bet you didn’t hear that side of the story, did you?”

Even with no blood running in my veins, I still felt my face heating with chagrin. “I—heard of some missteps, but no true injustices.” Except vaguely, from Reynard...

“No injustices? That’s hilarious. If he weren’t the king’s brother, and just any old minister or duke, he’d be dealt the fate he forced upon all the men who tried to resist his tyranny.”

His fury silenced me this time. It felt personal. Had Uncle Jonquil done something to his family while he was away at war? And if he had, had my father done anything about it since his return?

Probably not. Returning to a post-war kingdom, and a cursed daughter about to expire, Father must have had other priorities over fixing Uncle Jonquil’s individual injustices.

Any urge to defend my family evaporated like mist on a sunny afternoon.

But his words reminded me of Cyrus’s future bride, who’d supplemented her wages by stealing. I’d seen that as further proof of her being the worst choice for queen, and a horrible person who coveted what others had, and robbed them of what they held dear.

But in my last days in Cahraman, Adelaide had revealed how she’d lost her mother, had spent her adolescence homeless and destitute, but had only stolen to survive. She would have never taken important things from those who needed them.

According to his claims, neither would this Robin Hood.

It seemed it was my own uncle who had.

I still wasn't ready to accept his word on either claim. "Say I believe that none of what you took from the...most fortunate, was for yourself. Why do it for others? What did they give you in return—a cut of the proceeds?"

"The same thing you just gave me for serving in the war."

"A 'Thank you?'" I raised a skeptical brow at him. "And that's enough?"

"It is for me."

Since I couldn't see his face, I couldn't tell how he meant it. Sarcastically? Bitterly? Or, by some improbable chance, honestly, as his tone implied?

No. There had to be another motive for his actions.

"You consider redistributing ill-gotten wealth on the people the same as fighting those who aimed to invade us?"

He rolled his shoulders, an uncaring shrug. "Serving your people is serving your people, the specifics and the scope don't matter. I do what I can, where I can."

Those were words befitting the knights errant of centuries past. That rare breed whose lives endured into mythologized tales, who inspired chivalry long after their number had dwindled, and their function had been absorbed into the armed forces. Many had been knighted during the war, and sent back to oversee law and order throughout the kingdom.

But surely this man couldn't have been one.

"Why not become a sheriff then?" I probed. "Protect the public as part of the police, or in any other lawful capacity?"

"Because the system was corrupted under Prince Jon, and anyone who wanted to do their job was bullied into going along with them, or ousted."

"Why not—"

"Ghost Girl, any alternatives you'll suggest, I've gone through. This was my last resort, and the only choice that had an effect."

"I am not a ghost!"

"What else am I supposed to call you?"

I caught my retort in time to actually think it through.

Given his hatred of my uncle, and seemingly for everyone from my end of the hierarchy, I couldn't tell him who I was. He could take his anger out on me. I couldn't risk that.

"Well? Who are you?" He gestured to my body. "Judging from our conversation, you're not some fabled sleeper untouched by the passage of time. You're contemporary since you've heard of me, know the war is over, and you sound like you're from the capital." He leaned further over my sleeping form. "You look a tad foreign as well, and from the way you speak, I'd say you lived at court."

Despite not directly breathing, I felt my breath catch in my tight throat.

If he could tell so much about me, from so little, I couldn't provide him with any more information, or he would figure out my identity for sure.

Robin Hood of all people couldn't know I was Princess Fairuza.

So I gave the only safe answer I had, "I don't know."

"Don't know who you are? Or why you're a ghost—sorry, *apparition*?"

I could hear the eye-roll in his voice. It was incredibly expressive—tone, pitch, and inflection undulating along each word, like he was singing them. I could transcribe the exact notes of his delivery on a music sheet. I still wished I could see his face, and watch the expressions he was

sending my way.

He let out a heavy sigh. “Listen, I know you don’t like the idea of me, but you must trust me enough to tell me more about your condition.”

“Why do you think I know any more than I already told you?”

“Because no one blindly trips into magical situations. Whatever you did, whoever you crossed, I need to know the specifics.”

“Why? Why is that important?”

“Why?” He scratched his stubble with a scoff. “You must have hit your head harder than I thought falling off that horse. But to spell it out—if I’m to help you, I need to know what your problem really is.”

I was halfway to a resounding insult when the second half of his statement wormed its way past my burning ears.

“You—you want to help me?” I stuttered, the last two words rising to a squeak.

“I can’t just leave you like this, can I?”

“You can, actually,” I mumbled miserably. “Everyone else has.”

“I’m betting everyone else couldn’t reach you to start with,” he reasoned smugly. “Thanks to those gigantic briars that look like they’ve burst forth from the Underworld.”

The Underworld. I could be halfway to being dragged down there, leaving my soulless body well and truly dead.

Oblivious to my reigniting panic, he went on, “It would be helpful to find out why you were put here to begin with. Whenever I’ve heard of girls locked in towers, there was usually a covetous dragon or a deranged witch in the area. An active threat, so to speak.”

“I’m here for safekeeping, I suppose.”

He made an impatient noise. “Clearly. Any other information you’re willing to share? It could be vital.”

“Are you seriously going to try and help me?”

“I’m not saying it is my first priority, since I already have one, but I will come back to...” He stopped, reaching into his hood to scratch his head. “No. That wouldn’t work. You could be beyond saving by the time I return. Which means I’ll have to do something now. I need to figure out a way to get your body out of here, but with that infernal cage of briars, it will be tricky, to put it mildly.”

I was again stunned silent as he continued muttering to himself, trying to work out the logistics of my situation. This scourge of nobility actually seemed as invested in my predicament almost as my own brother had been.

He *was* serious about helping me.

“Maybe I should try to clear a way through those briars using my newly acquired loot.”

I came back to myself with a start, his words another rush of disappointment. “Don’t bother. No weapons have proved effective so far. In fact, the more anyone tried to cut them down, the denser they grew.”

He patted his bag, clanging the weapons inside. “But no one had anything like these beauties. According to legend, either King Herla and his men took them to Faerie with them, and they were affected by the magic there, or they were originally from there. Either way, I bet they’d cut through Faerie magic, not to mention prove useful in my journey. Though...”

“What?” I rasped, even when I dreaded hearing his qualification.

He sighed. “Moving your body isn’t a good idea. I should leave it here where it’s safe, while I go in search for the means to wake you up.”

“You won’t find any!” I cried out. “Just get me out of here!”

He just shook his head. “Even if I do, I can’t possibly cart your body around Faerie.”

I gaped at him. “You’re going to Faerie?”

“This was my last stop before I headed there.”

And if he went into Faerie, with the way time passed differently from our realm, it might be ages before he came back. If he came back at all. I would literally be the fabled beauty sleeping in the tower. If I weren’t long dead and rotting in eternal torment in the Underworld.

My shoulders slumped under the weight of resettling despair. “I suppose you’re going there to pester their monarchs, and relieve them of their fairy gold.”

He snorted. “That’s not the goal, even if I’m not against the idea of picking up anything useful I stumble upon.”

“What’s the goal if not fairy treasure, then?”

“I’m going to pursue the Wild Hunt.” He slung the bag across his shoulder, clattering the weapons noisily. “They took someone from me, and I’m going to get her back.”

His words sank in among the debris of hopelessness.

But as they hit bottom, an idea started forming in my mind.

As it took shape, hope sprouted, grew so fast, so ferociously it punched out of me in a shrill cry. “Take me to Faerie with you!”



## CHAPTER TEN



*R*obin Hood exhaled heavily. “I already told you I can’t drag your body around with me. It’s dangerous for both of us.”

“But I must accompany you to Faerie!” I pleaded. “That’s the only place to find a way to br... to put me back together.”

“How do you know that? If you don’t know anything else about your condition?”

“I—I...” I couldn’t tell him what I was thinking, or I would expose the nature of my curse, and with it probably my identity. “I just think if I’m being imprisoned by fairy magic, only it can restore me.”

Though I couldn’t see his face, I could feel his mind racing as he considered my words, and his options. Then without another word, he turned around and ran towards the broken window.

“Hey! Where are you going?”

He didn’t respond, just jumped to the windowsill—then he leaped out!

A shriek issued from both my body and spirit, torn between a yell at him for leaving me behind, and a scream of fright for him.

I flew after him, but stopped at the windowsill, watching him in horror.

*He was falling!*

Before my phantom heart could burst, he suddenly stopped plummeting. It took me heart-choking moments to understand how.

The maniac had free-fallen down the majority of the tower’s height. Then, in mid-plummet, he’d caught the rope he must have climbed up on. It was fastened to the battlements, and he was now hopping down the side of the castle wall, using the momentum of its swing.

At the speed he was going, he’d be long gone by the time I reached the castle doors. But I had no idea if I could jump from this height, or if I’d only float in place. Worse, what if my mind would be so terrified, it would kill my body?

But I had to risk it. I couldn’t let him leave me behind.

Cursing the Fates, fairies, and fickle thieves, I got onto the windowsill.

For long moments, as I looked down the terrifying height, I felt my non-existent stomach turn, and I almost toppled down.

So this was how Cherine had felt when she’d been dangling off that gargoyle with a hundred feet of space yawning below her. How had she not fallen? And how had Ada risked going down after her? And managed to get her up, too?

But if they had both braved such mind-numbing terror, when they'd been flesh and blood, and certain death awaited their fall, the least I could do was take my chances in my insubstantial form.

Squeezing my eyes tight, I jumped.

I only floated in place.

Gritting my teeth, I opened my eyes, forced myself to look down the stomach-churning height, and focused all I had on moving downward.

But instead of floating down like a feather, I plummeted like a rock.

I managed to slow down at the last moment, coming to a stop with a shriek within spearing distance of the largest, longest thorn I had ever seen. Being enchanted to keep me prisoner, now I wasn't returning to my body but escaping it, I had no way of knowing if it wouldn't have skewered me this time.

Robin landed beside me moments later, yanking the rope back down.

"What are you doing?" I seethed. "You promised to help!"

Again, Robin avoided responding, winding the rope's length and shoving it into his bag, before he waded into the thorn bush.

It was only then I looked around us, and gasped.

Where once the castle grounds spread, there was now an enormous expanse of tangled briars that stretched to their ends.

No wonder no one had been able to approach the castle again. Every inch of this roiling sea of thorns promised a slashing end to anyone who neared.

How had *he* crossed it all, and reached the tower?

As if in answer, he gave me a demonstration of just how he had.

With the grace of a great feline, and unhampered by the unwieldy weight of the bag swinging at his back, he jumped among the snarled serpents of black wood, every inch armed with blade-like spines. He landed on this one, ducked beneath that, twisting and springing, fluidly, swiftly, humming a tune the whole time, as if he was skipping down a primrose path.

After I tested my ability to phase through the thorns without being shredded to ghostly pieces, I followed him. My amazed gaze remained fixed on his complicated precision until we cleared the lethal expanse.

Once we emerged on the other side, still wracked with nerves, I shrieked at him, "Why did you leave me?"

With the briar expanse at his back and gazing down the rolling hill descending steeply before us, he just shrugged. "I had to know if *you* could leave this castle, or if you were bound to your body's location, before I gave you an answer."

At a loss for words, I spluttered outraged noises until I gathered enough wits to snap, "You could have just asked!"

"No, I couldn't have. You obviously didn't know until now."

"I did know! I left the castle before..." I stopped, since I'd only gotten as far as the front door, and hadn't even thought I could go that far.

He said exactly what I was thinking, "You clearly didn't go far, and didn't think you could, or else you would have left to get help."

I scowled at him. "Maybe I didn't leave because I thought no one could see me, anyway."

"If you thought you could leave, you would have tried, anyway. And then, you are very uncooperative. You still haven't told me what's wrong with you, and I didn't feel like spending another five hours dragging piecemeal information out of you."

“So you decided to trick me!”

He nodded. “I shot two birds with one arrow.”

“You still did it in a dishonest, not to mention distressing, way.”

“Oh, cry me a waterfall, Ghost Girl. I’m trying to help you, and however I do it doesn’t matter, as long as the deed gets done.”

My irritation with that nickname rose, only to subside as that sentiment resonated with something I’d heard before. From Reynard? I couldn’t recall. My memories of him had been fading since I awoke in this state.

I now wondered if this “end-justifies-the-means” school of thought had been revived by some idle philosopher’s untested theories, and had been infecting the commoners of our generation.

“I suppose you’re right,” I finally said grudgingly.

I needed this shifty brigand’s help, and agreeing with him would be the easiest way of getting him to provide it. This wouldn’t be too different to buttering up cutthroat courtiers, or showering foreign dignitaries with sickly sweet praise.

And then, if he so easily disregarded honesty and the foundations of right and wrong, then I ought to continue deceiving him as well. I would only tell him the truth if all else failed.

“Does this mean I can come with you to Faerie?”

“Depends. What is it that you need there, and is it harder to achieve than my original goal?”

“I don’t know what I need exactly. I already told you I think fairy magic can restore me.”

“And I think you know exactly what you need, but won’t tell me. I already told you I need the specifics.”

“I don’t have any.”

“Well, then, it’s been fun, milady.”

Then he turned on his heel, and started running down the verdant hill.

Stunned, I watched him recede, his cloak almost blending with the greenery surrounding us.

As I finally bolted after him, I appreciated being incorporeal for the first time. The hill was so wet and muddy, I was actually thankful my bare feet didn’t have to squelch like his booted ones did.

As feeling me approaching him, without looking over his shoulder, he said, “I know a girl with your upbringing believes that being difficult is how you get your way. But that won’t work on me.”

“My upbringing?” I echoed nervously.

“I hope you won’t be even more difficult and deny what I surmised about you in the tower.”

Oh, that. But since it was still scarily close to the truth, and to keep him at this conclusion, and no further, I had to resort to more half-truths.

I fell into step with him. “I *am* from Eglantine, and I did live at court. My mother is a foreigner who married a—high-ranking official. And I did end up this way by falling off my horse.”

“That wouldn’t expel your spirit outside your body. So, what did?”

Only a few people sworn to secrecy knew of the curses Leander and I had been subjected to. Maybe I could tell him this part of the truth, without having it traced back to me.

I finally exhaled. “Fairies.”

“Fairies—what?” I gazed into the opaque depths of his hood and he sighed. “Do I get to finally hear how some fairy made you semi-dead?”

“Do I get to see your face?” I countered.

He wagged his finger at me. “My face isn’t the key to your release, the specific method used on you is.”

“What do you mean method?”

“Did you not hear any fables at court? Or were they considered silly peasant tales you didn’t bother your refined mind with?”

I let out a weary groan. “Enough with the mockery. You’ve already made it clear you despise royals and nobles, so just get to your point.”

He made a sound like when Amabel fluttered her lips. “You’re no fun.”

“I can’t be fun when I need to be saved!”

“Fun and the pursuit of salvation are not mutually exclusive.”

I pulled a face at him, thankful that no one who knew me was around to reprimand me for making the ugly contortion, and that my true face wasn’t at risk of developing frown lines. No one liked a sour-faced princess.

But then, no one had liked my perfectly smooth, graciously composed one, either.

I had no idea what expression he made in response as he continued to run, not even out of breath as he said, “So, Miss Dreamer of the Woods, how did fairies make you ‘sleep’? Had a flower spray poison in your face? Tricked you into eating a fairy fruit? Made you prick your finger on an enchanted spinning wheel?”

“What are all these bizarre methods you’re suggesting?”

“They’re the fables’ suggestions for unnatural slumber.”

“Yes, but a spinning wheel? Do I look like someone who weaves?”

“You spin yarn on a spinning wheel, you weave on a loom.”

“How should I know the difference?”

“You mean you never learned such skills in your ladylike grooming? What about crocheting or knitting?”

I wrinkled my nose at the thought. “I never worked with my hands. It’s beneath me.”

Robin scoffed. “Anyone who makes anything with their hands is above you idle courtiers.”

I gasped, having never heard such a notion. “Workers are useful, certainly, but their place is undisputed. As for hand work, it is unthinkable for me because I wouldn’t have nice, painted nails or fingers worthy of precious rings. Working women’s hands end up looking like men’s.”

That had been exemplified by Cora. Despite having long, golden hair and fine features, she could have never passed for a girl of breeding. Her broad build, mannish muscles, wide, rough hands, and especially her tan, had betrayed her as someone who toiled in the sun.

And then there were the freckles, something I’d thought I was immune to, thanks to my mother’s heritage. But I’d met a Cahramani noblewoman whose face had been covered in them. Seeing how she’d carelessly ruined her skin had reinforced the importance of the practices drilled into me from childhood, of walking with parasols, and keeping to the specially built shades in gardens. Ladies had to retain their skin in the condition the gods had bestowed upon us.

Not that having pristine skin had done me any good. All I could boast now was being a magically embalmed body in perfect condition.

I could almost feel the disdain in Robin’s unseen gaze as he said, “They end up looking strong. And like they’ve done something more than sit around, looking pretty.”

I frowned up at him. “Why would a lady want to look strong? That’s what men are for.”

“And what are you for, pray tell?”

“Being your foil, of course. Gentle, graceful, delicate, untouched by the harshness of labor and war.”

“And what about the women who have to bear such harshness?”

“They are wronged, and I pity them.” I then remembered his earlier jab at ladies. “What’s wrong

with sitting around looking pretty? That's a very hard thing to achieve."

"What's wrong is that you're a person and not a painting. Oh, wait, you've probably never been near a paintbrush either, since that is messy hand work, and it would ruin your perfect nails and soft, useless fingers."

It was a good thing I was incorporeal, or else I would have picked up the nearest rock and chucked it at his head. That was how much every sarcastic snipe out of his big mouth irritated me.

Seemingly as annoyed with me, Robin blew out a forcible sigh. "This is why I can't wait to get her back. Talking to girls like you makes me appreciate her even more."

"Is the 'her' you're going to Faerie for, a relative, or a...?" For some reason, I didn't want to finish that question.

He didn't need me to, as he said, "Not a relative." Then I heard a smile entering his voice. "I wonder if she made it into any of the stories and songs about me?"

Oh, so he wasn't just biting the tender flesh of nobles like the rampant pest that he was, he was also luring girls into his misguided cause and dangerous pursuits? Somehow, that didn't surprise me.

"Every version I heard had a rotating cast of characters dubbed the Merry Men," I said. "From a priest to a knife-tossing madman, but no mention of any women. It must have been to protect that poor girl's honor, since you've likely ruined it."

"Trust me, Marian doesn't need anyone to protect her *honor*," he drawled, saying "honor" like it was the funniest thing he'd heard all day.

The way he talked about this girl annoyed me more than anything else, so much so I found myself sneering, "If she's so capable, why are you playing at being a knight and charging into Faerie to rescue her?"

"Because she was outnumbered and overpowered by fairies, you halfwit."

Startled by his sudden vehemence, I fell back a few steps.

If only someone who could break my curse had been this desperate to rescue me, then perhaps I would never have fallen asleep to begin with.

"Marian would have held her own against anyone else, but fairies?"

The rage thrumming in Robin's voice made my breath catch in my throat. "Fairies did this to me as well."

"Did what exactly? No more evasions, Ghost Girl."

"Cursed me. But instead of dying, I just..." I threw my hands up limply. "...became this."

His anger seemed to drain as he started scaling another hill. "So, no flowers, fruits, or spindles?"

"No, just a date for my demise, and a seemingly unattainable solution."

"So why do you think it's in Faerie?"

"Because someone I know found a solution to a similar curse there—a fairy, a royal to be specific."

He whistled softly. "Now, this is getting interesting."

I got distracted from answering him when we started going up the next hill and a group of people with four horses came into view at the top. And he was clearly heading towards them. Could it be his Merry Men?

Not that they sounded merry. Even from this distance, I heard the distinct notes of discord.

I soon realized only two of them were at each other's throats, a woman with curly brown hair and a man in a red coat. The other pair, a petite blonde sitting on a pearly white horse, and a man of inconceivable size standing beside the last horse, were watching their companions in silence.

Upon further approach, I had to blink repeatedly to credit the evidence of my eyes. But there was

no mistaking it. The two women were...

Agnë and Meira!

I found myself running towards them, babbling their names.

It was Agnë's mount that turned towards me and launched into a gallop. And it wasn't just any mare.

It was my unicorn, Amabel!

Elation expanded my chest, and combined with my weightlessness, I felt like I would float up into the sky, gleaming with all shades of relief like a giant soap bubble.

But that bubble popped when Agnë pulled on Amabel's reins hard, forcing her to stop before Robin as she asked urgently, "Did you happen to find anyone inside the castle?"

As Amabel whinnied her protests, Robin looked from Agnë to me, nonplussed. "What?"

"We've been looking for her all over this stupid kingdom!" Meira yelled as she rode nearer. "But now we've seen this castle, this is where she must be. Did you search the castle? This—moron..." She flung her hand at the man approaching behind her, the one she'd been arguing with. "...won't tell us what you were even doing in there."

"Girls, I'm right here!" I cried out, hoping against hope they might hear me. "Well, part of me is here, the rest is up there."

Amabel whinnied again, trying to pull against her reins. Agnë held her back as she suggested hopefully, "Maybe this was still the wrong castle?"

"Don't be stupid. Why else would that sea of thorns be there?" Meira brought her black steed to a stop, and jumped down, curly hair weighed down by the dampness in the air as she stalked towards Robin. Stopping before him, elbow lifting her dark-orange cloak to reveal a masculine ensemble of brown pants, a white shirt rolled up her forearms, and a blue vest, she jabbed an accusing finger into Robin's chest. "Did you find anyone in there or not?"

After a moment of staring down at Meira, Robin quietly swore and turned to me. "They can't see you."

## CHAPTER ELEVEN



Any excitement I'd felt at seeing familiar faces, and hearing that they had been searching for me, sank harder than a cannonball in a lake.

"I thought when you saw me, that it meant everyone else could now," I mumbled miserably.

"What do you mean 'now'? Did you know you were invisible?"

"My brother couldn't see me, neither could his friend. And when they sent someone my way, they couldn't see me either. I'd figured it was because I had just left my body, or it was to make this curse harder to break, since they were actively trying to break it for me."

"Rob, are you talking to the horse?" The man in the red coat approached, his wind-swept crown of dark curls brushing his square jaw, impatience sharpening his otherwise rounded, youthful features. He wore a long, deep-blue shirt, black pants, and had blades in sheaths over his boots, thighs, belt, and sleeves.

"Yes, Will. I've gone completely mad since you last saw me a couple of hours ago." Robin paused to look down at me. "Or I might have, but instead of hearing talking animals, I'm seeing half-dead people."

"You're making no sense," Will muttered.

"Any less sense than that castle and the unicorn?"

At her mention, I noticed that Amabel had approached and was sniffing in my direction.

Could she see me? Or at least, sense me?

"Hello, pretty girl," I greeted her, choking up as I floated towards her, and stroked her long face. I did feel her in a way I didn't feel anything else, not exactly like the old sense of touch, but soothing sparks of sensation. "Can you see me? Is this part of your magic, you glorious creature?"

Amabel shook her head up and down, making Agnë cling to her reins with a yelp. I was taking that as a *Yes*.

"Good girl! You're the best, my Mabily," I sobbed, hugging her head, wondering if she could feel me. From the way she snuggled into my arms, it seemed she did.

"I take it this is the 'horse' you fell off?" Robin asked me. "Her name is Mabily?"

Agnë gasped, and Meira jumped at him, grabbing him by his cloak. "Where did you hear that name?"

Will pulled her away from his friend, and Meira launched into a frenzied struggle, giving equal time to insulting her captor and demanding answers from Robin.

Will set her on her feet. “Would you shut up for a second? Are you even capable of doing that?”

Meira shoved him hard. “I have had enough of you thwarting me. Bother me one more time, ruffian, and I’ll stick all those knives where not even the coroner will find them!”

“Meira!” I chided, but it fell on deaf ears. Literally.

Surprisingly, the men only cracked up, their laughter infecting Agnë who covered her mouth, shoulders shaking with silent giggles, her fair face flushing pink.

The final member of the group arrived, and my jaw fell open. He’d looked huge from afar, but close up, he dwarfed even Robin. Well over seven-feet tall, with equally large features, and dark hair in a haircut similar to Will’s, his shirt and open grey vest must have been made out of bedclothes, his pants from a tent, and his leather boots from a wyrm.

“Is that a giant?” I breathed, staring up in awe.

“This is Little Jon.” Robin’s introduction interrupted his chuckles.

“Little? Oh, he is positively tiny. Miniscule. A true speck of a man.”

Robin’s chuckles picked up again when everyone else’s had died down, making them aim matching looks of concern his way. “Would you look at that! You have the makings of a sense of humor, after all.”

“Who are you talking to?” Will said, starting to look spooked. “Are you really seeing dead people?”

“I said half-dead.” Robin gestured up at Agnë. “Someone our guests appear to know.”

“We don’t have time for your elaborate jokes, Rob, not when we can finally go after Marian!” Will ground out, sounding as wound up and impatient as Meira did. “Who knows how much time has already passed for her in Faerie.”

“It’s probably the other way around, with time passing faster for us here,” Little Jon rumbled, his voice as big as he was. He stopped by Amabel, leaning on a large spear, petting her head, her ears disappearing under his massive palm. “Did you find anything useful in there?”

Robin tossed the heavy brown bag at him. Little Jon caught it effortlessly with one hand and slipped it on, addressing Agnë, “What was your friend yelling about?”

“He said ‘Mabily,’ ” Meira burst out instead. “That’s what the pri...the girl we’re looking for called her unicorn as a child, when she couldn’t say Amabel.”

How did she know that? She and Agnë hadn’t come into my service until I was around ten, and had long been whipped into perfect diction.

Robin tilted his head at me. “So where did you get a unicorn? Are they breeding them at court now?”

“Mabi—Amabel was a gift from a foreign dignitary. He’d caught her as a filly, but couldn’t train her, so he gave her to...the court.” I paused for a second before completing the half-truth. “She ended up as mine.”

“For the last time, who are you talking to?” Will gritted.

“The sleeping girl in King Herla’s fortress, that’s who.” Robin presented the empty air they saw where I stood. “She’s right here, and for some reason I’m the only one who can see her, except for the horse.”

Amabel whinnied trotting around me in a circle, as if to agree.

Meira was skeptical. “How do we know you’re telling the truth?”

“You don’t, but how else would I know about Mabily? Not that I owe you any answers, anyway. Who are you two?”

Will rounded back on Meira. “Exactly. We didn’t get more from you than your names.”



“More importantly, who is *she*?” Jon asked Agnë, pointing at my general direction.

Robin’s head lowered to my level expectantly. “I actually don’t believe I caught your name.”

I balked, caught between introducing myself as Princess Fairuza of Arbore, or as the alias I’d used at the masked ball.

Then I opened my mouth only to say, “Briar.” His eyebrows shot up and I quickly amended my response. “Rose! Briar Rose!”

“Briar Rose.” Robin nodded, seemingly satisfied with that name. “Is there such a thing as a briar rose?”

“According to my father, it’s a flower that blooms in extremely rare instances.” Almost as rare as the birth of an Arborean princess. “And smells sweeter than any other rose.”

“And your father is what at the court?” Robin probed.

Panicking, I groped for a response that would fit the half-truths I’d listed earlier. “He’s involved in the, uh, upkeep and the, um, flourishing of the land, overseeing it and the people who lived on—off it.”

I almost wanted to scream at how lame that had come out.

“So, the Minister of Agriculture?”

I latched onto his suggestion, too eagerly. “Yes! Exactly!”

“Hmm, if you say so.” I had no idea if he believed me, his voice going as unreadable as his hidden face. Then he turned to my handmaidens. “The ghost-like girl from the castle says her name is Briar Rose, that she’s the daughter of a minister at court, and that she’s under some ambiguous fairy curse that can only be solved by finding fairy royalty. Any of that rings a bell, or am I well and truly hallucinating?”

As a testament to either their confusion or cleverness, Agnë and Meira didn’t respond outright, possibly processing the hints I’d hidden in my responses.

Then Agnë joyously exclaimed, “It is her!”

“Yes, it is our dear Briar Rose,” Meira agreed, not nearly as enthusiastic. “Where is she?”

Robin pointed where my head was, and Meira aimed her gaze in my direction. All her grouchiness melted into agitation, her dark eyes shimmering with wetness. “I’m so sorry, we should have tried harder to help you.”

In all her years in my service, Meira had been filled to the brim with impatience and snappy comments, all softness and sweetness coming from Agnë. Seeing her on the verge of crying was a shock. Not just because of the stark shift in behavior, but because it was out of worry for me.

I’d actually figured they’d forget about me like everyone else seemed to have done. That, like other handmaidens, once they’d been released from my service, they’d be relieved to be rid of all my demands forever.

Instead, they’d come to find me.

Trying to wrap my mind around that fact, I whispered, “Tell her none of it is her fault.”

Robin relayed my response and Meira’s tears spilled down her frustrated face, revealing themselves to be born out of anger rather than misery. That was more like the Meira I knew.

“Why would finding fairy royalty undo her curse?” Robin asked her.

Wiping her eyes, Meira sniffled. “It may be because she was cursed by a fairy queen.”

The men all gaped at her.

Robin broke the silence first. “This seems like a very long story, and as much as I’d like to hear it, we really need to get going.”

“You’re really going into Faerie?” Agnë squeaked. “For F—Briar, or for your rescue mission?”

Robin shrugged. "She and I have already discussed combining our causes."

"Could you have discussed it with me?" Will grumbled. "*Before* you invited a new problem for you to solve?"

"It's not going to affect finding Marian," Robin promised as he headed for the chestnut mare. It was only then I noticed the quiver full of arrows and the large bow strapped to her saddle. Robin Hood's signature weapon.

"It better not!" Will snapped as he climbed on his mottled-grey stallion and Meira remounted her black mare. "I know you can't turn a blind eye to random people in need, but this is my sister we're talking about. Who knows what these hunters have been doing to her!"

"You underestimate her," Robin said as he hopped on his mare in one impossible move. "I keep thinking she has probably long escaped, and is trying to find her way home." Will looked about to explode, and Robin rushed to add, "But we're operating under the assumption that they still have her. Briar Rose's need to meet fairy royals will actually work in our favor. They might tell us where the Wild Hunt roam, or find us people who might have seen Marian."

"Faerie is a vast place," Agnë pointed out, "and the people are very protective of their borders. We don't want to risk what happened to Prince Leander—"

It was too late to take back that slip-up as Robin asked curiously, "You know the prince?"

I rushed to answer before Agnë made it worse. "Of course, we lived at court."

Agnë had said something in answer as Robin started to ride up the hill, but thankfully his attention was back with me. "He told courtiers about what happened to him?"

He made it sound like he himself knew about Leander's ordeal, which made me question just how far gossip went in this land.

"It's not like he had a choice," I reasoned, floating beside his trotting mare. "He is marrying a half-fairy girl. That alone needed a good explanation to get all those around him to approve of a future fairy queen ruling Arbore alongside him."

Robin cocked his head down at me. "Speaking of fairy queens, why did one curse you again?"

"I thought you said we had no time for stories."

"We do, now we're on our way. By all means, talk while we ride."

Though I didn't tire anymore, I so wanted to ride Amabel again. Not even knowing if I could, I swung up, maneuvered myself behind Agnë, feeling only Amabel beneath me, and thankfully not slipping through the saddle. To my delight, Amabel made that little shimmy she always greeted me with whenever I mounted her.

After we cleared the hill, we rode towards a daisy-dotted clearing that spread to the woods in the distance, the only one on foot but easily keeping pace with us was Little Jon. A man of his size would probably crush any horse he attempted to ride.

Robin brought his horse next to Amabel, cocking his head at me. "So?"

"How about we wait until we do manage to get an audience with a fairy royal?" I diverted, something I'd practiced for years when being sucked into unpleasant conversations with difficult people—like my mother. "I'd rather tell this story only once."

Thankfully, this made him give up. For now.

Soon, we entered the woods, and it was like we'd stepped into deep autumn, only then making me realize it had been spring outside.

Thick mist curled at our horses' legs, and the rays of light straggling through the thick canopy of branches and leaves bore no illumination or heat.

I soon looked back, and couldn't even see the light where we'd entered. All our surroundings

were unnervingly dark, with the rows of gnarled trunks seeming to go on forever, with the path ahead the only clear direction.

Little Jon led the way, the easiest to follow even with us on horseback.

“Is he a giant?” I asked out loud, knowing only Robin could hear me.

Robin slowed down so he rode beside us. “He has giant blood in him.” Agnë started at his seemingly out-of-the-blue comment, and he pointed behind her. “Answering Briar, who’s clinging to you like a limpet.” Agnë choked, and he laughed. “No danger of her possessing you, though, since it seems she’s isn’t a malevolent spirit. Yet.”

“So nice of you to be so reassuring,” I snapped. “Now tell her it was another one of your delightful jokes.”

Before he could say anything, Agnë blurted out, almost tearfully, “Tell her I’m not afraid of her, and how sorry I am she is in this state.”

Robin waved. “Oh, I don’t need to play messenger here. She can see and hear you fine. So you better watch what you do and say.” I almost heard the wiggling brows in his voice, before he turned back to me. “About Jon, his ancestors came from the Northland Kingdoms.”

This reminded me of Björn, the Northlander who’d found me skinny. He’d been the largest man I’d seen until now. Little Jon made him look average-sized.

“When did you meet him?” I asked.

“While guarding the border during the war. He’s had a bit of a growth spurt since.”

“A bit?”

“Believe it or not, he was your height, and much smaller than the average lad; therefore, the nickname. He kept shooting up, but Little Jon had stuck, and the bigger he got the funnier it became.”

“It’s so strange,” Agnë said. “Feeling like you’re talking to me, when I can’t hear her responses...” She swung around, eyes unseeingly searching for me. “I didn’t mean to talk about you as if you’re not here... Oh, why can’t we see you?”

Meira came up beside Robin. “Yes, how come you, of all people, can see her, and we can’t?”

Robin shrugged. “Who knows. Maybe the fairies will give us an answer.”

“If there was one, we’d know it,” Agnë blurted, and Meira leaned over past Robin and thumped her hard on the head.

“Ow! What was that for?” Agnë complained, swatting back.

“You know what that was for!” Meira smacked at her hand. “And you hit me all the time, it’s only fair.”

“I hit you because you say awful things.”

“Well, I’m hitting you because you’re saying stupid things.”

I squinted between them. What were these two even fighting about now?

“Ladies, if you’re going to be this loud and difficult, we’re going to have to lose you,” Little Jon warned, his deep voice reverberating between the surrounding trees. “And you don’t want to get lost where we’re going.”

“Where exactly are you taking us?” Meira demanded. “You can’t reach the isle of Nexia through Briarfell.”

“That’s because we’re not going to Nexia,” Will snapped at her. “Last time we tried reaching Faerie through that place, it did its best to kick us out. It even broke Rob’s arm.”

The story Leander and Bonnie had told me came back to me at once. How the isle of Nexia had all but literally thrown out anyone who’d registered even as partly human like her, due to the inhabitants’ alliance with Avongart in the war. The war that had erupted in the first place over

Arbore's rejection of magical people.

“And that's why I've been searching ever since for an alternative route, and discovered this fairy path in these woods.” Robin rotated his arm, as if in remembered pain of its prior injury, before pointing ahead as a wider path appeared among the trees. It was a yellow dirt road lined by huge, glass-like, blue mushrooms that emitted an ethereal glow. “This should lead us directly into the Summer Court.”

## CHAPTER TWELVE



The path looked exactly like the one from the dream I'd had before waking up in Briarfell.

And if that wasn't enough, I remembered another incident Bonnie had mentioned in passing about crossing one like it. She'd been attacked by vicious fairy creatures, and Leander had almost died saving her from them.

"Is crossing one of these fairy paths safe?" I asked Robin. "Don't bloodthirsty gnomes live around here?"

Robin snorted. "Redcaps, you mean."

Will pulled his horse into an abrupt halt, forcing us all to stop behind him. "Redcaps live here? You didn't tell us that!"

"Those things are vicious!" Meira mirrored his alarm.

"I know all about them," Robin assured us. "I've killed quite a few in Rosemead, in a wood just like this one. Besides, I found us a guide. He'll lead us through the Faerie courts with minimal attacks."

Will groaned. "It's not that wacky bard with the stag, is it?"

"It's an elk, I believe," Robin said, eliciting a louder groan from Will. "You want to find Marian without any of us dying, right?"

"Yes, but that Allen of the Dale nutter?" Will muttered, still looking appalled.

"He's our best option of making it through Faerie in one piece—and he's not that weird," Robin argued, sounding almost fond. "Fine, he is, but I quite enjoy his company. He gave us some much-needed relief in the war camps, playing the strangest music, and recounting the craziest things he'd seen across Faerie."

Will palmed his face. "He's a bard, Rob. He's living in another century, wandering around singing and laughing like a demented loon. First time I saw him, I thought he was hallucinating from severe blood loss."

"How does he travel across Faerie?" Meira asked, sounding as worried and suspicious as Will. "Is—is he from there?"

Robin nodded. "He does appear to be part fey. Centuries might have passed in his wanderings, which could explain the anachronistic behavior our dear, intolerant Willoughby takes such issue with."

Will made a rude gesture in Robin's direction.

Appalling behavior! But I couldn't expect better from commoners who spent their youth among soldiers. They wouldn't know what to do among more polite company. Just like I didn't know what to do among them.

Maybe it was a blessing they couldn't see me, and I didn't have to interact with them. Though I interacted with Robin just fine, and he...

My thoughts halted as a memory tugged my mind towards snippets of songs and stories I'd heard on rainy days in court, both prior and during the war.

"I know of an Alan-a-Dale!" I blurted out. "Could he be the same person?"

"I've heard of an Alan-a-Dale!"

Agnë had spoken in unison with me, but Robin answered my question. "Either that, or he's from a long line of bards using that name."

Will continued his disapproving muttering. "Whatever he is, he's annoying. Never knows when to shut up."

Curiously, Meira joined him, just as cranky. "Bards are always annoying. And after so many overdramatized songs, you lose all tolerance for that whining string instrument they play."

Where had Meira heard a wandering bard? Were there even bards still in this day and age? They were an outdated concept, lost to the growing urbanization of the western end of the Folkshore, and the growing wave of industrialization. We now had professional singers and composers traveling to sing on elaborate stages in opera houses, to paying crowds.

Unfortunately, Arbore wasn't leading the Folkshore in those arts, with the most inspired music coming from our former enemy, Avongart. At least they didn't have the prettiest lyrics, too. Those came from Campania, with their vowel-filled language just lending itself to musicality.

"I, for one, can't wait to hear him," I said. Not that my input would make any difference. It would go as unheard as my ambition for music. "I haven't sung in so long, and even longer since it's been of my own accord."

"People *forced* you to sing?" Robin sounded taken aback.

I sighed. "Demanded and expected me to. To entertain others, and only the approved material. *Always* one of five songs. You can only sing the same songs composed to flatter royals so many times."

"Did Prince Jon have you sing vacuous amendments to *Father of the Realm* daily?"

"Not daily, that would have driven me insane, but, Gods Above—*how did you know?*"

"That pig and his ilk are just that predictable."

Before I could even consider taking offense, Little Jon's voice joined in, a thrumming bass even my boneless self could feel. "Please, don't talk about that man. Keep talking about the lunatic singer, or about those monstrous imps we could find here—just not him."

"What's your issue with Prince Jonquil?" Agnë asked.

A chorus of outraged voices rose, Meira's among them. So she, too, shared their terrible opinion of him? And she'd never told me. Of course.

"I don't like to be reminded His Vileness exists," Little Jon growled. "Because it makes me want to curse my parents for naming me after him."

"You were named after him of all people?" Agnë, despite trying to not badmouth my uncle, seemed to cringe at the thought of him being anyone's namesake. "Why?"

Jon huffed a mighty exhalation. "My father is a proud immigrant, his family having fled the Northlands when he was a child. He decided to name all his children after members of the royal family to embody his love of this nation. My eldest sister is Florentina after His Majesty, I am Jonquil

like *him*, and my younger brothers are Oleander and Rowan, after the king's uncles."

My father and nine of his predecessors were called Florent, as per tradition. Also, my younger siblings, Esmeralda and Florian, were named after our parents—their fresh start after presuming they'd end up losing their older children to the Spring Queen's wrath. But to find that strangers had my family as namesakes was simply fascinating.

Leander himself was named for our great-uncle Oleander. Mother had objected to her firstborn being named after a poisonous plant, and Father had compromised by dropping the first letter, saying it now sounded based on the Orestian name Leandros.

If only he could have found as clever a compromise to his broken engagement with the Spring Queen, I wouldn't be Ghost Girl now.

My thoughts halted as we traversed farther into the fairy path, and I just *felt* it. We'd left our realm behind.

The transition was subtle, yet indisputable, not unlike when we—the Final Five vying for Cyrus's hand—had been taken for our second test into the witch-city of Zhadugar.

However monstrous the redcaps they were referring to were, I hoped they were nothing like the ghouls I'd been thrown to, by Zhadugar's ruler, Marzeyya. Oh, how I hated that woman! And she had looked as horrifying as she truly was.

The blue light from the glass-like mushrooms intensified, tinting our surroundings, and augmenting the soft, yellow glow of the path as it snaked ahead through navy-blue trees. But it was the blinking, multi-colored lights that appeared in batches, hovering at different elevations that now caught my attention.

"Fairy fireflies," Robin said.

"What?" I turned, and found him leaning towards me.

"You were making a face at the light-bugs. Thought I'd explain what they were."

"I keep thinking you're addressing me." Agnë looked over her shoulder, light-blue eyes looking dazed as she looked through me. "Sorry, but it's a bit disorienting."

Robin waved. "I should have considered how confusing it must be for you. If I talk to you, I will use your name, Miss..."

"Agnë."

Robin hummed. "Sounds like an Orestian name."

"Yes!" Agnë sounded shrill all of a sudden.

"You're too fair for an Orestian," he noted.

"I've been in Arbore for years. So many rainclouds, shorter summers, you know how it is."

"So the lack of sun turned you into a blonde?"

"Um, no, uh, yes—I mean..." Agnë sounded like she'd hyperventilate at any moment.

"Leave the poor girl alone," Little Jon ordered from up ahead. "She and the mouthy one have had a hard time looking for their friend. It's enough they've arrived to find her split in half, a part out of reach, and a part invisible."

"I'm just making friendly conversation," Robin said innocently, when he was clearly indulging in his favorite pastime of investigating others, like he'd done with me.

Though his line of questioning this time made me realize how much I didn't know about my handmaidens. I'd only known they were from two different lands, one from the south and one from the north.

But I'd always thought Agnë was the northern one. So if she was from Orestia as she'd just claimed, which, like Robin felt, made no sense, that made Meira the Northerner. Which made even

less sense.

“Mouthy one?” Meira snapped from behind us. “I have a name, you oaf! What even *are* you, anyway?”

“He’s a sentient boulder.” Will ducked to avoid the swipe of Little Jon’s spear. “No, no, I’m sorry. He’s actually an oak tree dryad.”

“If anyone is a tree here, it’s you, *Willoughby*,” Little Jon retorted.

Will sighed. “If only I were as tall as a willow tree.”

“You’d be a weeping willow, because you never stop whining,” Robin added, surprising an amused snort from me.

“And what would you be, hmm?” I asked him.

“I’d be no tree, but I’d make my nest on any of your briar branches.” Robin then whistled, a clear, agile tune mimicking the energetic trilling of the songbirds I’d once heard outside my window every day. Red-breasted robins.

He had a good ear and perfect pitch, judging by how he reproduced the complex call. In another life, he could have been plucking guitar strings, rather than pulling bowstrings.

The squabbling banter died down as we continued down the path. And despite the unease that anything fairy-related induced inside me, I had to admit it was quite lovely so far.

Suddenly, I felt the mood around me change, a new tension gripping my companions. I saw Will drawing a dagger out of his boot, while Robin asked Little Jon for the crossbow he’d taken from the castle. He tossed it to him and pointed his spear forwards.

Then I heard it. A haunting sound that rose, surrounding us like a vortex of emotions, amplifying the surreal atmosphere, seamlessly pulsing to the rhythm of an approaching staccato.

From the dense mist, right in our path, a gigantic set of antlers emerged, and I almost choked on my ghostly heart.

Had the Horned God himself tired of waiting for me to descend to his domain, and come to drag me there himself?

Before I had a chance to fully panic, the mist parted, and what appeared wasn’t Death with his skeletal stag’s head. It was a man in an umber cloak, riding a huge reindeer, and playing that evocative tune on his lute.

Suddenly, he started to sing, his voice as mesmerizing as his music, with elongated vowels and lilting tones.

*“I will tell you of Will Scarlock, Little Jon and Robin Hood, they were outlaws as it is known, their hideaway the forest of Sherwood, a land no man, noble or thief, could ever own.”*

“It’s Will *Scarlett*!” Will’s shout shot out like an arrow into a glass orb, shattering the hypnotic crooning. “And why do Jon and I always come before Robin in all of your ballads about him?”

Entering the light of the fairy path, the bard came into clearer view.

He had long, wavy, auburn hair, but olive skin like a Campanian, and stormy-grey eyes that glimmered like quicksilver. His resting face looked grim, then he cracked a smile that felt less like a greeting, and more like a warning declaring, *Beware, Here Be Danger*. He was nothing like the funny little man their argument about him had painted.

“He comes last for rhyming purposes,” said Alan-a-Dale, scanning the group before him in a slow drag of his eerie gaze. “Many good words go with ‘hood.’ Structuring quatrains ending in your names is painful.”

“Lots of good words rhyme with my name,” Will argued.

“Either none too flattering, or mundane. Take your first name, for instance.”



He strummed his instrument briskly, breaking into a jaunty tune.

*“There once was a boy named Will,  
Who’d have you believe he could kill  
A thousand enemies with ease and spill  
Enough of their blood to fill a rill,  
Always boasting of such great skill,  
Spinning a dozen blades like a mill  
But ask anyone and they will  
Tell you he is sour and shrill  
Building mountains of e’ery molehill—”*

“Enough!” Will shouted, his ears turning as red as his coat.

Alan stopped playing, looking quite pleased with himself. “But I had some verses still.”

“I said stop it, you fairy fool. It’s a wonder nothing over there has eaten you yet.”

“They’ve tried, but all come to realize the truth about me.” Alan leaned forward, slowly batting his eyelashes. “Tempting to bite, but lethal to fight.”

“If you start speaking in rhyme, I will use you for target practice.”

Ignoring Will, Alan’s eyes lingered on my handmaidens, each girl’s fidgeting reaction inspiring a higher rise in a corner of his lips. “You didn’t tell me you were bringing guests.”

“Unexpected tagalongs are a hazard of the job, Alan.” Robin rode towards him, and they clasped hands as Jon introduced Agnë and Meira. Then they moved to each other’s mounts, Robin scratching under the reindeer’s chin, while Alan stroked the horse’s head.

“She’s new,” Alan remarked.

“Maple belonged to a friend who has since given up hunting,” Robin said. “I figured I’d take her to save her the idle life of a stable horse.”

Alan nodded. “I think I know who you mean. How are the residents of Rosemead since the Beast and his fellow monsters vanished?”

Suddenly, I was fully invested in their conversation. So Robin had been in Rosemead while Leander was there, too? With this Alan? They certainly got around.

“I haven’t been back there since the Duke of Briarfell’s wedding, though I assume it’s the same old since the excitement died down. But we’re more interested in the conditions in Faerie. We have more than one score to settle with its residents. Think you could get us an audience with any of the royals?”

“I can manage at least two *monarchs*,” Alan said smugly.

“Ask him which ones!” I urged.

Robin relayed my question, and Alan said, “The Summer King and the Autumn Queen. But you won’t like how you get there.”

“Doesn’t matter how, just as long as it gets done.”

“Story of your life.” Alan sighed fondly as he turned his reindeer around, and began strumming his lute again. “Follow me closely, and never lose sight of me. And no matter what you find or what finds you, don’t stop moving.”

If I wasn’t concerned about our expedition before, I certainly was now.

But the prospect of meeting the Summer King overshadowed everything else.

This was better than I even expected. From what Bonnie had told me of their encounter with him, King Theseus didn't have a queen. And he fit all the other criteria of the curse. He could be the one!

As Alan and Robin led the way farther down the winding yellow path, I recognized the melodramatic song the bard was playing, a folk song called Todd and Tabby, about a case of mistaken identity between a commoner fox and a royal cat.

Robin seemed to be the only one who recognized it, too, and he started singing along halfheartedly. Knowing only he could hear me, I joined them. He snapped his head around, and even within the obscuring darkness of his hood, I thought I saw his lips spread in an approving grin.

That urged me to sing a little louder, leaving inhibitions behind, along with my kingdom, past, and identity.

Soon, the path ahead started to shimmer, like wind-blown waves under a morning sun, riding the rising and falling of our voices.

Then the landscape shifted around us, the dankness and darkness of the woods catching the fire of colors, warmth, and brightness as it smoothly melted into an open expanse of sand. Salty wind blew through all of my companions' hair and flapped their clothes, so warm and humid even I felt it. But it was the rumble of waves, ebbing and flowing nearby, that solidified our arrival into another realm.

Until now, my rash decision to follow an infamous outlaw off the continent, and into a world of mayhem and magic, had been a desperate, yet illusory, concept. Now, it had become an irreversible reality.

I had left Arbore without my body, and taken my soul into Faerie with only the hope that someone in that realm could reunite them.

If this quest failed, I would go straight from the land of the fey, to the land of the dead.

## CHAPTER THIRTEEN



Under clear blue skies, and swathed in crisp colors, the capital of the Summer Court sparkled like a jeweler's masterpiece layout.

Arranged between an encompassing coast of azure waters, and the towering backdrop of a gleaming mountain, its architecture ranged from spiraling buildings like upright conch shells with pearlescent hues, to faceted houses painted in blinding white and cerulean blue, to golden temples topped with onion-shaped domes. Everything looked like a magical cross between the desert kingdom of Cahraman, and the mountainous coastal region of Orestia.

Which was strange, considering this side of Faerie was farthest away from both those corners of the Folkshore.

Stranger still was how the similarities filled me with a dull ache of nostalgia.

Who'd have thought I'd actually miss Cahraman, after all that had happened to me there?

But even while I'd been losing test after test, being humiliated and thwarted, being forced to rethink my importance, to face my true worth, there'd also been aspects I didn't regret. A new sense of action, of excitement, of choice. Even the harrowing experiences in Mount Alborz had had a silver lining.

I'd looked violent death in its nonexistent eyes, and I'd survived. I'd worked with my enemy to survive. And I'd left that cave knowing nothing lasted. Not enmity, not expectations, not status—not life itself. It had made me realize how much I wanted to live. How I hadn't truly lived up till then.

I had come back from this experience much changed. I had started to see the world differently, to mature. And to realize I probably wouldn't have a chance to continue my journey of growth.

But maybe now I was here, I'd get that chance.

Now I looked at the massive limestone mountain in the distance and felt that sentimental pang intensify. The walled city sprawling at its foot in levels, reminded me so much of Sunstone, the capital of Cahraman. And maybe, just maybe, it might become my new home.

Robin's voice roused me from my reverie, asking Alan why he was diverting our path.

"Humans aren't allowed past these," Alan said, pointing towards the royal palace gates. "I'll have to take you in a shortcut through the mountain."

All my fuzzy feelings evaporated as the memories of my one time inside one mountain assailed me.

"Is this really the only way?" I complained loudly, even when it was only to Robin. "In my experience, scary things make their homes inside caves."

Agnë stiffened with a shriek in front of me. She twisted around so hard, she almost tipped herself off Amabel's back.

Mouth hanging open, she stared. Not into space, but—at me?

Then she let out a delighted squeal, “You're here!”

She threw herself at me, only to go through me. She would have fallen headfirst, if Little Jon hadn't caught her.

As he settled her back, she gazed at me in horror. “You're not here!”

“Hello.” It came out almost a sob of relief. She *could* see me. “I am sort of here.”

Agnë faced forward and yelled at Meira, “Can you see her, too?”

Meira was too busy trying to shut her slackened jaw to respond.

Will wasn't faring any better, eyes threatening to pop out.

“You can all see and hear me now?” Each one nodded, stunned. “I can only assume it's because we're in Faerie.”

Robin nodded. “It stands to reason. Your current form is a fairy magic construct, and now you're here, others can perceive you.”

This didn't explain why he'd perceived me back in our realm. But for now, I'd be grateful for this development. Maybe it was a first step towards restoring me.

Will turned to Robin. “I could have sworn you were pulling our legs about the invisible girl bit—but she really is here.”

“You always assume the worst of me.” Robin placed a mock-hurt hand over his heart. “Would I ever lie to you?”

“Would you ever—?” Will scoffed. “Would you like a list of all the times you've deceived me, or left out vital information?”

“You mean when I couldn't risk anyone overhearing me spoon-feed you my plans? Or when I had to take action without risking you slowing me down?”

“Slowing you—? We're evenly matched in speed of aim! I'd argue I'm quicker on the draw because I don't have to fiddle with my bow and grope around for arrows!”

Robin flung a hand at him. “See? Being so literal is why I can't tell you all my plans.”

“It's not his fault Marian got all the brains in the family,” Little Jon said, still staring blankly at me.

“That she did,” Robin agreed, watching the others who were still watching me in shock.

Except for Will, who seemed to have forgotten me as he burst out, “If she was so smart why did she chase after the Wild Hunt when it was the one night they freely roamed our lands? This is what comes of her following *your* strategy of acting without telling others in advance. It's why they kidnapped her!”

It got uncomfortably quiet as Will panted in distress, seeming to relive months of fear and frustration like they were fresh incidents. A condition I had become all too familiar with.

I wished I could offer him anything comforting. But I had no experience in handling others' feelings. Whenever I had tried, my efforts had been perceived as mocking or condescending, for what would a princess know of stress? I also hadn't been trained in the art of empathy. In fact, my mother had drilled into me that it was a weakness unbecoming of a future queen.

Luckily, Will had friends who didn't share my shortcomings. Both men reached bolstering hands to his shoulder and back, wrenching him back to the present.

“We'll find her, I promise you,” Robin said solemnly. “And when we do, you can throw as many knives at the Wild Hunt as you please. All right?”

Will nodded, squeezing his wet eyes shut.

“Time to go through the tunnel, folks,” Alan said brightly, as if he was suggesting a stroll on the beach. “It leads straight into King Theseus’ palace grounds.”

Strangely, the bard was the only one who hadn’t been shocked by my visibility. He’d only been watching me with narrowed eyes, almost like he was trying to place me. Even stranger, now that I saw him in a brighter setting, I found him familiar as well. Not in the sense that I knew him, but that he reminded me of someone.

But I couldn’t dwell on that as we set out to enter the mountain, and a sense of foreboding drowned everything else out. Then we were riding deeper into its craggy insides, and I could no longer suppress the nightmare-inducing memories of my last trip through one.

We were ascending a slope sculpted from dark-red stone, whose glow illuminated our path, when Meira fell back to ride alongside us, thankfully distracting me from the rising tide of remembered horror.

Chewing her lip, she finally said, “It’s good to see you again.”

“Even if it isn’t in one piece?” I tried to smile at her, and failed.

Meira ducked her head. “If we had known it would be like this, we would have tried harder to find a solution.”

“There was no way we could have known that only her body would sleep!” Agnë looked back at me with eyes filled with agitation. “I doubt even the Spring Queen could have predicted this.”

The mention of that woman stoked the flames of my fury towards her and all fairies. “How could she not have? She’s the one who cast the curse, and must have tampered with its amendment! Didn’t you see the thorns encasing the castle?”

Meira nodded, seeming to shrink further. “It’s just that magic isn’t always precise, especially when its wielder speaks their will without carefully chosen words that instill limitations and conditions. The less specific the spell, the more room there is for unseen variables.”

“Like the wishes given to genies?” I recalled what the genie of the golden lamp had done to Uncle Darius’s family, as well to Nariman the witch—now his new wife, of all things. The devious creature had found ways to turn demands into disasters, just by interpreting their imprecise wording differently.

“Like that, but without malicious intent,” Agnë mumbled.

Our conversation died down as we arrived at the mouth of the tunnel to the Summer King’s palace. The silence allowed me to ponder their words, not to mention their unexpected distress over my predicament.

Being my constant companions, they’d been among the few taken into confidence about my curse, and they’d always seemed dedicated to me. I’d never actively thought why, but now I did, I supposed I’d believed it was because I was the princess, and their jobs afforded them a life that was almost as luxurious as mine.

The way I’d been raised, with everything in my life being focused towards the day I’d marry Cyaxares and break my curse, I’d never given much thought to anything else. I’d never truly wondered if they actually liked me, let alone cared for me or my fate.

Yet, with the evidence of them being here now, they did care. Far more than I could have imagined. It was actually strange. But then, through the years, there had been strange instances and inconsistencies that had raised questions in my mind about them. But I’d always been too involved in my own affairs to pursue answers.

Now as I tried to form theories about their involvement in this quest, the tunnel kept getting

narrower and darker, our trail only lit by luminescent patches in the walls. It seemed to go on forever, and even the men's bickering came less and less.

Then in one of the quiet stretches, I heard something move. And not the scurrying of insects or rodents.

The sound seemed to come from within the walls, like something had awoken, and was burrowing and scratching its way out. It was so familiar it dredged up the memories I tried so hard to drown.

But my fears broke through the surface with a splash that hit every corner of my mind, overtaking it with an immediate urge to flee.

"There is something in here with us!" I cried out.

"Ignore it." Alan's voice came from ahead. "Keep moving."

"It won't make a difference." My voice rose to a shout as the rousing and rushing within the walls grew closer. "They'll be here any second—"

"I liked it better when I couldn't hear you," Will cut me off. "And what are you worried about, anyway? It's not like anything can happen to *you*..."

Something launched out of the darkness and threw itself at him.

Among the startled shouts, my horrified scream, and the panicked neighs of our horses, more dark-dwelling creatures seemed to come out of nowhere, swarming us.

*Ghouls!*

## CHAPTER FOURTEEN



*A*fter plaguing my nightmares for months, where I'd thought they'd remain, I was again staring into the eyeless face of death.

Those deathly pale beasts were almost identical to the ones Ada and I had fought in the cave of Mount Alborz. Slimy, leathery skin, slit nostrils, sharp-toothed maws filling half their faces, and jagged claws curling out of knuckles-deep nailbeds.

With a roar, Robin threw a ghoul off his back, then shot the one accosting Agnë with an arrow from his crossbow, where its left eye should have been.

As Agnë shoved the ghoul off with a shriek of revulsion, Robin reached our side, shouting, "What are these things?"

He was probably asking Alan, but it was me who screamed, "Ghouls! Flesh-eating monsters!"

Robin ripped the arrow out of the ghoul's face before it fell beneath Amabel's hooves, reloading it back into his crossbow as he yelled, "If you know anything about these things, tell us now!"

"Don't waste magical weapons on them," I yelled back over the cacophony of the ghouls' rabid attack and our companions' desperate struggles, hoping they'd all hear. "They're easily killed and have no sense of self-preservation. They have no strategy, are just masses of mindless hunger. But they're relentless and voracious and will pick your bones clean if they overpower you."

Robin smashed his crossbow into a ghoul's head, cracking it wide open, spilling its brains out in blackened clots. My phantom stomach lurched.

"What else did you hear about them?" he shouted as he followed my advice, trading the crossbow for his regular bow, shooting at incoming ghouls in a blur of speed. I couldn't imagine anyone being faster than *that*.

"I've *seen* them! They tried to eat me!"

"Then tell us how you survived, quick!"

"A friend kicked one in the head to death, and I smashed another one's head with my hoop-skirt."

"Your what?" He gaped at me momentarily, before tearing his gaze away to continue impaling ghouls.

I rushed to add, "But we mostly ran, sticking together, giving them a single meal in one place, just a little out of reach. They ripped each other apart to get to us first, giving us a chance to escape. And—and if we can find a body of water, they can't swim."

He didn't need to know that neither could I, or that Ada plunging us into that submerged shrine had been a last desperate act. There'd been no way out, and the ghouls had just waited for us to get out

and be eaten, or choose to die by drowning.

If it hadn't been for outside intervention—represented in Cora, Cyrus, and Ayman, that wraith-like man Cherine Nazaryan had insisted was a ghoul, but who'd turned out to be Ada's half-brother—neither of us would be alive today.

Not that *I* was alive today.

"No chance of water here," Robin shouted as he cracked a ghoul's neck with a vicious kick of his booted foot. "But we can do the one-meal thing. If we gather to block the tunnel, there will only be one direction for them to attack. Then we retreat until we're out of here."

He shouted his strategy to the others, but each was too preoccupied with their own mindless attackers.

Will, with blades blurring in both hands, furiously slashed at every ghoul that grabbed at his horse or his legs, screaming increasingly filthy expletives at them. Alan had unsheathed a massive sword I hadn't seen before, was arcing it in sweeps that lopped off the heads and hands of the monsters in his way, while his reindeer stomped on those crawling across the ground. Little Jon gave up impaling them with his spear, resorting to sheer force, more efficiently smashing them against the walls.

As the stench of the ghouls' black blood filled the area, all I could do was scream warnings at Agnë and Meira as ghouls snatched at them. Being unarmed, they were at the most disadvantage.

As if realizing this, Will shouted, "Meira, catch!" and flung a knife our way.

Meira threw up a hand, but instead of catching the blade, she halted it inches from her palm! Her *glowing* palm!

Then she ripped it from the air, and with ferocious screams, she alternated between hurling ghouls away with brisk gestures, and stabbing those who jumped at her horse.

I hadn't had time to reel at what I was seeing, when Agnë's own hands filled with what looked like smoldering snowballs. She hurled them at the ghouls who came too close, eliciting teeth-gnashing screeches as the ice somehow burned through their fetid flesh.

This was it—the explanation for all those little weird things about them.

*They were witches!*

All these years, those closest to me had been the one thing I hated most in the world—after fairies, at least.

But whatever their reasons were for being in my service in the first place, and for being here now, that could wait.

We had to survive first. *They* had to.

But soon, Agnë and Meira started to tire, their magic flagging, and ghouls kept coming. They were starting to surround us when Amabel gave a piercing neigh and kicked a few back. She reared up and landed on the rest, crushing some with her hooves, and spearing others with her horn.

"Good girl!" I cheered her on as she continued destroying any ghouls who escaped Agnë and Meira. "Best girl!"

"This is how we can implement our retreat," Robin shouted as he pulled an arrow out of his latest kill's throat, and stuck it in a new attacker's face. "If we can get the horses to attack like Amabel."

"Good luck convincing them of that!" Will yelled from up ahead as he lopped the heads of two incoming ghouls with his swirling knives. "They're scared witless, and won't budge!"

"On it!" Alan leaped off his reindeer, so inhumanly high, there was no doubt he was part fairy. If there was any left, it was laid to rest as he zigzagged between the tunnel walls above us, literally bouncing off them, before landing behind us.

He proceeded to smack every steed's rear hard, scaring them enough to overcome their dread of



the ghouls. They launched ahead, their mass and speed overwhelming the majority of the ghouls in our path.

“Regroup ahead, everyone,” Robin thundered. “Block the tunnel!”

As we started to obey his order, Agnë swung around, and screamed Little Jon’s name. I looked back in time to see him being buried under two dozen ghouls.

Just as Robin started to gallop back to his friend’s aid, Little Jon exploded up from the pile of ghouls with a roar, drenched in his own blood and theirs, holding one by its massive jaw. He stretched it wider until he broke the whole head apart with a nauseating crack and a shower of black blood.

Cora had done the same in Mount Alborz, that day I’d had to reconsider my belief in demigods. She’d fought a ghoul off us, then had broken its neck with her bare hands. She’d left that cave swinging its head like a purse she’d just acquired, intending to embalm it as a trophy.

That memory swamped me with revulsion again as Little Jon threw the broken ghoul at the rest so hard, he knocked them all down.

As he ran to join us, he yelled for Alan to lead the way out, with Will and Robin flanking us, and with him holding the rear. Alan regained his way at the front in the same spectacular fashion, and jumped on his enormous reindeer.

The ghouls we left unscathed were joined by dozens more. But they finally slowed each other down. With their prey in a unified front, and only one path to reach us, their blood-thirst turned towards taking out the competition. They slaughtered one another, rupturing limbs and tearing throats, their screeching rising to a nerve-shredding crescendo.

“It worked like you said! They’re turning on each other!” Robin’s voice was elated as his hooded head turned back towards me. “Where did you even stumble on these things before?”

“Not now, we’re almost out!” I pointed where a circle of light grew at the end of the tunnel.

“Speed up,” Meira shrieked over her shoulder. “Before they shift their attack strategies.”

Will urged her horse ahead as he shouted, “They’re not smart enough for that, like Briar said.”

“They don’t need brains, when there’s so many of them,” Meira snapped back.

She was right. Sheer numbers could overwhelm anyone. And those we’d been fighting only seemed to have been the advance wave. The tunnel at our back was now swarming with ghouls. We couldn’t risk slowing down.

We didn’t. The opening grew as we retreated as fast as we could, brightness revealing details of what lay on the other side—the groves and trees of a palatial garden. Soon, we’d be with the Summer King. And if we played our cards right, he could fix all our problems—

A clawed hand tore through my middle, grazing my ghostly insides.

As I cried out in agony, I realized I wasn’t the only one in danger. A few ghouls had distracted Jon, and this one had reached through me to grab at Agnë.

Before I could whimper a warning, it caught a handful of her cloak and ripped her off Amabel’s back.

“NO!” I reached for her in mindless horror, forgetting that I had no power, no grip. She literally slipped through my fingers.

Agnë fell back with a scream, disappearing in a blink into the darkness of the tunnel as Amabel thundered to the exit. No amount of frantic yelling could make her turn back.

As we burst out of the tunnel, the transition to the sunny palace grounds almost blinded me. I still saw Robin jumping off his horse and running up to me, hood miraculously still fastened on, unscathed by the attacks.

“It took her!” I wailed, feeling as if that ghoul’s clawed hand was still lodged in my insides, disintegrating me. “I couldn’t do anything, couldn’t... They’ll eat her, leave nothing but bones and hair...” Like those skeletons I’d seen in that other cave.

Without a word, Robin bypassed me, and shot back towards the tunnel.

Little Jon, who was the last to exit, bloody and battered, gaped at him in confusion. Before he understood what was going on, Robin zoomed past him, and disappeared back inside.

We all stared after him in shock, as the sounds of rabid struggle and feasting echoed from within.

Will was the first one to recover, bolting to follow Robin. Jon staggered after him, pulled him back at the very mouth of the cave.

“We can’t leave him to fight alone!” Will yelled at him.

“I hate it more than you, Will,” Jon said, deep voice a strident rasp as he looked back at me, noting Agnë’s absence with a pained grimace. “But I barely made it out, and if we go back inside, and don’t come out again—Marian will be lost, too.”

Will still didn’t stop struggling against Jon’s restraining grasp, until Agnë suddenly staggered out, drenched in black blood.

As she threw herself at Little Jon, he growled at Will not to go after Robin, then picked her up. She latched onto him, sobs shaking her all over.

He rushed her to me, setting her atop Amabel, murmuring soothingly as he stroked her ghoul-blood-matted hair.

Ghostly tears sprang from my eyes, which hadn’t happened before, no matter how I’d begged for their release. Now, their cold burn ran down my face, an agonizing relief.

She was back by my side, in one piece, and all I wanted to do was wrap my arms around her, and be certain that she was still whole. I couldn’t tell with all that black blood

“Did they bite you?” She shook her head, so I asked the more pressing question. “Did you see Robin?”

As if she didn’t hear me, she flopped bonelessly over Amabel’s neck, with Jon alternating between petting her back and Amabel’s head. “They fought over me, ripped at each other. One managed to grab me for itself and—and...” She dissolved into shaking sobs.

“Just tell us what happened!” Meira bit off agitatedly.

Agnë swayed upright, hiccupping through her sobs. “It opened its mouth wide—it’s breath alone almost made me pass out...I knew I’d die, then...Robin was there! He—he fought them off me!”

“What happened to him?” I asked, dreading the answer.

She shook her head, and I went colder than I already was. The urge to follow him was overwhelming, even when I now knew these things could hurt me. But I’d be unable to do a thing to help. I’d only stand there and watch those ghouls tear him apart.

All I could do was watch as Will bellowed Robin’s name into the cave, growing increasingly hysterical.

Suddenly, Will’s shouts stopped.

Dreading the reason, I stared at the cave’s mouth as the sounds of shuffling echoed from within, getting nearer, nearer, then...

Robin swayed out.

My insubstantial heart almost burst with relief as I heard him slur, “Muss you shout this loud? Was busy...”

Will caught him with a frantic hug, before recoiling. “You’re bleeding!”

“M’fine, less jus’ keep goin’. Need to find...find...” Robin staggered back and out of Will’s hold,

collapsing on the ground in a dead faint.

I didn't even feel myself moving, but I beat Jon to Robin's side as Will shook him and yelled his name.

"Where is he hurt?" I frantically looked him over, ice spreading through me at the sight of the expanding red stain on his olive-green shirt.

"In more than one place. But I think most of the blood is coming from a head wound." Jon gripped the edges of his hood. "We must check it."

"No, don't!" Will's objection fell on deaf ears as Jon bared the face of Robin Hood to the world.

Blood caked his tousled, sandy hair from a serrated gash that ran from the crown of his head down to his left cheekbone. His skin was ashen with blood loss, making the freckles smattering his cheeks and nose stand out. Long lashes brushed his cheeks, and his full lower lip was split and bleeding.

The specifics of his face stopped there, because the only feature I had eyes for anymore was his ears.

Lacking earlobes, and tapering up into angular points, his ears were those of a fairy.

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN



In the commotion, no one noticed that Alan had left.

He now returned with men in pearly-white-and-sun-yellow uniforms, reminiscent of the Cahramani royal guards. I watched numbly as some carried the unconscious Robin off to their healers.

Before he trailed them to go have his own injuries treated, Jon had to hold Will back from following them. The guards insisted the healers allowed no one to accompany or see their patients until their treatment was complete. Will wouldn't back down until Jon convinced him that the sooner we concluded our business with the Summer King, the better for all of us. It was what Robin would want.

They left us with the palace official Alan brought with him, a fairy woman who could have been Meira's much taller, pointy-eared sister.

Ears. After all that had happened since Robin had burst into my tower, I could think of nothing but his ears.

Robin Hood, the mysterious outlaw, the bandit bane of Arbore, was a fairy.

It was inexplicable. Why would a fairy live in our realm, be a soldier in Arbore's army, and champion the poor and downtrodden? Yet it also made sense, explaining his exploits, and how he'd evaded capture all these years.

It also meant I had placed my fate in the hands of the same kind of creature that had condemned me in the first place.

But then again, I was here in the land of all the fairies. I was surrounded by those mischievous and cruel tricksters by choice, and bound on asking one of their monarchs for help. Desperation had a way of changing one's perspective, indeed.

I'd spent my whole life hating witches and fairies, only to find out that my closest companions were the former, and my only hope of salvation was the latter.

Irony in its purest form.

Lost in my thoughts, I floated after our procession as our steeds were taken to the stables, and then as the official escorted us to the palace that looked like it was carved from a gigantic pearl.

I'd seen all levels of styles of opulence since birth, but this place made me realize how art and imagination, unbound by their very nature, were constrained by the finiteness of human abilities. This place was imagination unleashed by the limitlessness of magic. Every inch spoke of eternity and pulsed with enchantment.

Those curving walls with their infinite inscriptions that breathed with magic *were* made of pearl. The interior was encased in arcane mosaics of precious stones, and spread in acres of pearlescent marble veined with molten gold and unending, spun-silk carpets with floral designs that bloomed under our feet.

As we waded deeper into the palace, and away from the crystalline windows and domes pouring sunlight and rainbows, our path was lit by cascading clusters of luminescent opal and ruby-grape chandeliers, with their jade leaves and gold vines whispering and undulating in an unfelt breeze.

“The king will meet with you when your companions recover.”

I broke out of my daze to Will’s loud protests at the fairy official’s declaration. The only reason he hadn’t accompanied Robin and Jon was thinking it would speed up our business with the king.

But Will wasn’t a match for the persuasion of fairies, and the woman managed to lead him away to his quarters. Alan opened another one for my handmaidens and me.

As I passed him, I was again struck with that sense of familiarity. It was maddening I still couldn’t tell who he reminded me of.

But when I opened my mouth, it wasn’t to ask anything about him. “Is Robin going to be all right?”

Intrigue glimmered in his stormy eyes, and he leaned against the wall beside the door, smirking at me. “You’re worried about him?”

His incredulous question startled me. For I was.

And it shouldn’t make sense. Not from my perspective, or Alan’s.

As the princess of Arbore, I shouldn’t worry about the man who, no matter his declared motivations, stole from my relatives and made a mockery of my kingdom’s laws. It might not even make sense to worry about one man, when we had lost thousands fighting against Avongart.

Yet Alan wasn’t asking me as the princess, but as Briar Rose. The men must have told him about the minor noble who’d tagged along on their rescue mission. From his standpoint, Robin had done his part for me. I would get my meeting with the Summer King anyway, and we’d part ways, unlikely to ever cross paths again. I had no reason to be worried about Robin.

So why, indeed, was I? I didn’t know him, hadn’t even gotten a clear look at his face, and he was a criminal and a fairy...

And I was *terrified* for him.

The moment I could, I would float out of here, and go check on him, the healers’ orders notwithstanding. That terrible wound where a ghoul had almost chomped his head off... My phantom stomach turned.

I gulped down the nausea, and cocked my head up at Alan. “Why wouldn’t I be? I couldn’t have gotten here without him, and he saved Agnē.”

He looked inside where my handmaidens were rushing to what looked like a bath chamber, no doubt to get cleaned up.

He stabbed a thumb at them. “What are those two to you again? You seemed distraught when the ghouls almost ate the blonde one.”

“They’re my...companions. We spent every day at court together. Losing one of them is unthinkable.”

“Interesting. I didn’t know your sort cared so much for their lessers. Or is it because losing them would be an inconvenience?”

Affront rippled through me, blowing off the remains of my fright-induced fog. “My sort? How dare you make any presumptions about me!”

“Don’t act so offended. It’s not odd to wonder how people feel about those who work for them.”

How did he know they worked for me?

I crossed the threshold, putting some distance between myself and the bard. “Who are you? Do I know you? Do you know me?”

“Because I know they work for you? It’s obvious from the way they behave towards you. The one who almost got eaten seemed shocked by your concern.”

Was she? Because she never expected me to feel anything for her? After eight years of spending my every waking hour with them?

Then I could have lost her in a single moment.

Rage suddenly spiked to a fever pitch. “She almost got eaten because of you! You told us going through the mountain was a safer option! You almost got us all killed.”

He started to laugh, like my anger was the funniest thing he’d seen in a long while. Oh, how I wished I could slap him, or break that stupid lute over his head!

“What’s so funny?” I gritted.

“People really do hear what they want to hear.” He shook his head, still chuckling. “I never said it was safer. I said it was a shortcut that takes you around the gates you couldn’t have entered through at all.”

“You could have warned us of the danger.”

“I did, said you wouldn’t like how we got here. I just didn’t know it was *that* danger, specifically.”

“How could you not? Have you not been through there before?”

He waved offhandedly. “Sure, by myself, when I moved fast enough the creepy crawlies I heard didn’t have time to come after me. It’s why I kept saying keep moving. I suspected traveling in larger numbers with skittish horses would slow us down, and multiply the danger of getting caught in an ambush. Which was what ended up happening.”

“You think you can exonerate yourself from anything, don’t you? But you can’t. You could have made sure we were prepared! Better still, you could have searched for an alternative route!”

He shrugged. “Any other path would have taken days, and I don’t have time for that.”

“Why? What’s got you so busy, Alan? If that is even your name.”

“Neither is Briar Rose yours, Fairuza.”

“How do you...?” My exclamation snapped off in a breathless squeak.

“Know who you are?” he completed for me with a wiggle of his auburn eyebrows. “Because after a chance reunion with long-lost relatives, I’ve taken interest in my extended family’s lives, and in your case, afterlives. Or is it in-between-lives?”

Outrage rose within me, at this *fairy’s* claim that he could be related to me. “There’s no way any of my ancestors married your kind!”

“True.” He pointed back and forth between us, grinning wickedly at me. “But we’re about to become in-laws, seeing as your brother is marrying my cousin.”

Relief that I didn’t have any secret fairy ancestry evaporated under the blast of realization.

If this Alan-a-Dale was truly from Bonnie’s maternal family, this could make him the “crazy cousin” she’d been looking for. The one Leander and Clancy had said was the perfect candidate.

Could he be that Keenan?

Before I could ask, he turned away, tossing over his shoulder, “Oh, and I was questioning your intentions concerning Robin and your girls, because I recently witnessed a disgusting dynamic that I helped dissolve. I am now always wary of obviously imbalanced relationships.”

Defensiveness subsiding, I trailed after him. “What happened?”

He stopped, eyebrows raised at my concern. “A girl was enslaved by her stepfamily. They tortured her for years in ways you couldn’t imagine.”

“Is she fine now?”

“She’s safe.” A genuine smile overtook his unnerving smirk, changing his whole face, making it even more familiar, and...

Bonnie’s father! Mr. Fairborn! That was who he reminded me of.

He was Bonnie’s *paternal* cousin? But her father was human.

So how was this man half-fairy? How was he royal? He had to be, if Leander and Clancy considered him among the noblest of men.

Before I could fire any questions, he again spoke first. “But it will be a while before she’s ‘fine.’ At least her stepfamily got what they deserved.” He gave me a deep, mock bow. “And now that I got *you* where you need to be, I must get back to my own princess. Another evil stepmother to take care of, and all.”

So, there was already a girl, a princess no less, preoccupying him.

Of course there was.

All my hopes concerning him evaporating, I watched Alan, or Keenan, as I suspected him to be, stroll down the hall. Once he disappeared, I dragged my insubstantial body into the room.

Another pang of nostalgia hit me as I took stock of my surroundings. The room was of a similar size and configuration as the quarters we were first allocated in Sunstone Palace, during the first phase of the Bride Search.

It was vast, with soaring ceilings and queen-sized beds distributed at varying distances from each other, with one wall wrapped in stained-glass terrace doors. Even the color scheme of vivid earth tones approximated those of the other quarters.

But I was in no mood to appreciate the splendor of the decor. Or to reminisce about the time I’d been trounced by a thief, in the test I’d prepared for my whole life.

Agnë and Meira had returned from cleaning up, and were now at the breakfast nook, hunched over a gilded table, gorging themselves on an assortment of bakeries and fruits.

I almost shouted for them to stop. Eating fairy food came at unpredictable prices.

But they’d already eaten it. And they must have been starving.

Sighing, I floated towards them, Alan’s words, or Keenan’s, as I now thought of him, niggling me.

I *did* care for them. I might not have actively thought about it before, but I did. I never had friends at court—my mother made sure I didn’t get close to any Arborean noblewomen. Unlike my sister Esme, who was provided confidantes in the offspring of her Cahramani ladies-in-waiting, I had no one to be myself around, except for Meira and Agnë.

They weren’t replaceable to me. I would have missed them sorely if they’d ever left, and would be heartbroken if I ever lost them, like I’d almost lost Agnë today.

As for them turning out to be witches—it certainly raised many questions. But whatever their answers were, I was discovering it wouldn’t change the way I feel about them.

I stopped beside Agnë, wondering if she’d supplemented soap and water with magic to get rid of all that ghoulish blood. “How are you feeling?”

Agnë waved off my concern, trying to grin up at me with a mouth full of crumbly, purple biscuit.

“We should be asking you that!” Meira tossed a slice of a ruby fruit I didn’t recognize down in her plate, flinging a hand at my form. “We still can’t figure out how this happened.”

“It’s not your job to.”

Meira slammed her fist on the table, rattling everything, reminding me of Leander’s temper when

he'd been turning into a beast. "Yes, it is! It's our job to watch out for you! We should have known the Spring Queen wouldn't just let you sleep."

"Everything *is* the Spring Queen's fault," I insisted. "And if there is anyone else to blame, it's the fairy godmother who added the 'sleep' amendment of the curse without thinking it through!"

Agnë choked, spraying soggy bits of biscuit that had turned green, while she turned an alarming crimson. I instinctively reached to thump her on the back, but to my unending frustration, my hand went straight through her.

I exhaled. "Are you all right?"

Meira shoved a glass of water in her face, hers even more pinched than usual. "She just eats like a pig. And this place is making us anxious. We should leave as soon as possible, to see about removing that curse."

"But we're here to do that. I thought you figured out that I will attempt to get a declaration from the Summer King?"

"Oh. Right. We did." Meira laughed nervously. "Our fates are all in the hands of the fairy monarchs now."

"They control everything, you know?" Agnë rushed to add.

They were both behaving more strangely than usual. But they had almost gotten eaten by ghouls, when they had no business following me into Faerie to begin with. And they'd exposed themselves as witches in the thick of battle.

I sighed. "So, are we going to mention the camel in the room?"

They both fidgeted and looked anywhere but at me.

"Can you just tell me what two witches were thinking, getting jobs taking care of the princess of a royal house with strict anti-magic rules? Who eventually went to war with other kingdoms over magic and its wielders?"

Agnë choked again, even with an empty mouth.

Meira only blurted out, "We're not witches!" At my knowing look, she gulped. "We just know a few magic tricks, and..."

I raised a hand, stopping her agitated explanations. "There was a time when I would have been horrified, would have not wanted to lay eyes on you again. But now, you're only my closest companions, and the ones who cared enough to come for me, to be with me when I'm no longer myself. You're yourselves to me, and I don't care what else you are."

Agnë's eyes filled with tears, and Meira's breath caught in what suspiciously sounded like a sob. Then they both surged up, attempting to hug me. They ended up bumping into each other through my phantom form.

Pushing away from each other, their indignant exclamations were so ridiculous, I just had to laugh. After a stunned moment, they joined me.

When we finally sobered, Agnë cleared her throat. "You shouldn't be upset with Robin Hood over his, um, ears either. He did save me, after all."

Robin!

Renewed alarm burst inside me as I swept around and floated away.

Meira rushed to intercept me. "Where are you going?"

"I need to see him! His wounds looked terrible!"

Agnë came to flank me from the other side. "The healers will take care of him. And we've been assured we'll see him tomorrow."

"Leander once told me the Summer Court has the longest days in the realms of Faerie. Tomorrow



could be next week for these people, and I can't wait that long."

"But they said they allow no one into patients' rooms," Agnë protested. "They must have them guarded or warded or both. They're probably guarding our quarters, too."

"Good thing I won't be going through any doors, then."

"But..."

I didn't wait to hear more of their misgivings. Gritting my teeth against my aversion to walking through anything, I went through the wall behind one of the beds.

I walked through all the rooms in the hall, managing to avoid most occupants' notice, but startling a couple. It took some investigation, but I eventually found where they were keeping Robin.

There were guards at the door, and the healers were still with him. I waited, my mind storming with worries and questions. Once they left, I went in through the wall of the adjacent room.

Then I saw him, lying there on the bed unmoving, and shirtless, and forgot everything.

## CHAPTER SIXTEEN



*I* tried to remember. What I'd come here for. Where here even was. But it was impossible to think at all.

It was also impossible not to look. I had to keep looking, after all, to be sure that his chest rose and fell. If I happened to notice how wide and defined it was—or how the variety of scars over his muscled shoulders and thick arms and sparse abdomen, told many stories—that was unavoidable.

His head injury seemed to have been sealed, as if the torn flesh and scraped bone had been reformed, leaving a narrow, angry line down his temple and cheek. His other injuries were hidden beneath faintly glowing bandages. His skin had lost its pallor, its tan warm, and uniform, like he had labored under the sun, possibly during the war, digging trenches and setting up tents.

The thought of a man sweaty and dirty from work, with his skin altered by the sun, should have been repulsive to me. But as I approached him with bated breath, the hammering of my heart had nothing to do with aversion. And that was before his face captured my focus to the exclusion of all else.

A face thousands had speculated about over the years, wondering what this infamous man looked like under that hood—if he even existed at all.

Yet here he now was, right before me, asleep, and with a face not even the most gifted of painters could imagine.

His face was a canvas of singular structures, filled with the finest details I'd ever seen in a man. Arched, dense eyebrows gracing a leonine forehead and a ridged brow, and shadowing thick lashes that brushed prominent cheekbones. A slim, proud nose covered in a dusting of freckles residing over sculpted lips split by a thin, healed cut, and a wide, triangular jaw stubbled with gold. All in proportions my drawing tutors would have called a "golden ratio."

Not even the pointed ears could upset the balance of beauty in this man. In fact, as much as I hated to admit it, they may have accentuated it.

Enraptured, I leaned over to take a closer look, committing his face to memory—and realized something.

I'd already seen enough fairies, including Bonnie, with their perfect faces and forms, but there was a quality to him that neither they nor humans possessed. It was as if the best in each species had gathered in those entrancing features. Also, his skin differed from the fey's pearlescent sheen...

His eyes flew open, instantly alert and slamming into mine.

The deepest, most vivid forest-green—like his hooded cloak.

My mortified recoil had me floating away, my gaze still captured in his.

He said nothing, until I began to worry he couldn't speak, that the healers only fixed his flesh, but his brain was damaged...

"Of all the ways to get unmasked, this had to be the least exciting option."

I gaped at him. He'd spoken. But his voice... It was clearer, more sonorous than it had been with his hood on. Then what he'd said registered.

"Least exciting?" I exclaimed. "You could have died!"

He tried sitting up, hissing with pain until he settled back, head propped up by the pillows. "I always thought it would be along the lines of being captured while performing a legendary heist, and taken to the throne room, where I'd have the pleasure of spitting in Prince Jon's eye."

"And get your head chopped off?"

"Better than getting it bitten off." He felt his head with a grimace. "The teeth on those things, never saw anything like them."

I shuddered. "I've now seen enough of them to last me three lifetimes."

His dark-pink lips spread in a dazzling grin before the cut on his bottom one reopened. He caught it in his teeth with a wince, licking it soothingly, before smirking. "So—what do you think? Am I what you expected?"

"I'm not sure what I was expecting. But it definitely wasn't you being a fairy."

He touched the tip of his ear, huffing in tired amusement. "If it makes you feel any better, I'm half-human."

That explained my earlier observation, of him looking the best of both worlds. Also why he had freckles, like my Arborean blood making me susceptible to sunburns. "Which half is fairy?"

"My mother."

Like Bonnie, then. How common was it for human men to marry fairy women? And was it of their own free will, or were they influenced by their magic?

"What's with the face?"

"What face?"

He wrinkled his nose and curled down his mouth. "You look like you just smelled rotten food, a foreign experience to someone like you. Then again, where did a castle-bred courtier see flesh-eating demons?"

"I...um." I grappled for a good lie, but found none.

Ghouls were native to hot, sandy lands only, dwelling underground away from the scorching sun, digging tunnels to reach burial grounds, and feasting on the rotting flesh of the dead. But, as I knew all too well, they wouldn't turn down fresh meat.

I'd already told him my mother was a foreigner, but if I mentioned I'd seen them in Cahraman that would be another dot for him to connect...

"Running out of lies, huh?"

If I could sweat, my scalp would be drenched now. "Lies? What did I lie about?"

"Do you prefer omitting the truth? About what you were doing in that tower, about why a fairy queen of all people cursed you, and what you need with King Theseus now?" He counted on his fingers, their tips white with callouses. Bowstring scars. "Not to mention, about your identity?"

"Like you're not?"

"Who I was doesn't matter anymore, so, no, I'm not. As of five years ago, I am no one else but Robin Hood."

“So who do you think I really am—a peasant playing at being highborn?”

“Actually, I think it’s the other way around.”

“I never said I was a commoner.”

“But you’re not the Minister of Agriculture’s daughter either, because I’ve met Lord Weatherly, and he’s a pasty redhead.”

“And his red hair discredits me as his daughter, how?”

“It does, because I also know his wife, whose father was a landed knight, and definitely not foreign. Your foreign blood is as plain as the ears on my head.”

Offense sprayed in my chest like the corrosive venom of a desert lizard. “That is in no way comparable!”

“How so? We’re both the products of mixed-marriages.”

I couldn’t hold back the infuriated squawk. “My parents may be from different lands, but they’re both human. That is not the same as you being a...”

I trailed off, holding my tongue in time.

One brow rose challengingly. “Finish that sentence.”

I shook my head.

“Finish it. Tell me—what am I?”

Affront dissipated under a flood of mortification, as I remembered Leander’s arguments with our mother about Bonnie. She’d called her a half-breed, and willfully equated her to the genies and fairies she hated, not to mention the witches that murdered her own mother. She completely disregarded that Bonnie had saved her firstborn, and the dozens who were subjected to his curse.

This kind of indiscriminating prejudice was what had made the Spring Queen curse us in the first place. Whatever terrible experience Mother had had with magical beings, and whether they’d been totally in the wrong as she’d always claimed, she’d ignored her job as queen, of being political and pragmatic. She’d burned any goodwill the queen had had left for Father, the man who’d jilted her, calling Queen Etheline a monster, and threatening her with iron in front of hundreds of guests. It had made Etheline do monstrous things in retaliation.

And I was here to fulfill the deal my mother had rejected, to free myself by marrying a fairy royal, as Queen Etheline had initially demanded in return for peace.

But whatever I felt towards fairies, and how they might still end up damning me to a fate worse than death, it wasn’t Robin’s fault that his mother was one. Just like it wasn’t my fault Zomoroda Shamash was mine.

“Let’s hear you say it, Briar.”

I shook my head again. “I’m so wound up and stressed, I almost took my anger at fairies out on you, and it’s not fair—especially when I came here to thank you for saving Agnē’s life, at the risk of your own—so, thank you.”

Robin bowed his head, seeming to accept my apology or thanks, or both.

And I blurted out, “Why did you do that?”

He blinked at me. “Do what?”

“Throw yourself into the ghouls’ midst?”

He seemed even more perplexed. “Because if I hadn’t, your friend would be being digested in a dozen separate stomachs as we speak.”

“Why put yourself at risk of the same fate, then?”

“Briar, I fought on the frontlines, then spent years courting the ire of powerful men by disrupting their corruption. I’m used to being in danger. And I came to this place to rescue a girl taken by beasts.

It would be contrary to everything I stand for if I didn't try to rescue anyone in similar danger."

"You're quite honorable for an outlaw."

"Dealing with dishonor is what made me an outlaw. I see injustice that everyone turns a blind eye to, and I deal with it myself, even if I get a price on my head for it."

I bit my lip, trying to imagine what it must have been like for him. "That's a miserable, thankless existence to choose."

He smiled, and winced again, licking his own lip. "It's not, if I'm lessening the misery around me. And it would be thankless if I had no impact. The good results are thanks enough."

He'd said something to the same effect before. Words worthy of chivalric oaths, of men worth following into battle, and being immortalized in song. Ideals I hadn't expected Robin Hood of all people to spout.

I hadn't believed them when he'd first said them. But now, after I'd seen the evidence of his chivalry with my own eyes?

"You would have made a great knight," I murmured.

He exhaled. "That was the dream before it all fell apart. My father was a knight in his youth."

"You can still achieve it, once this is all over and done with." If I returned to Arbore whole, I would see to it that my father absolved whatever charges my uncle made against Robin, and knighted him. "Saving Agnē alone would be worth acknowledgement from the king."

He sagged back. "I didn't do it expecting acknowledgement. And I would have done it even if I was certain I would die."

"But why?"

He let out a weary chuckle. "Because I can't help myself. Ever since the first time I helped someone, I haven't been able to stop."

"You're *compelled* to help? Is that some sort of curse?"

That busted a harsh laugh out of him, before he stopped as abruptly, touching his bandaged side with a hiss. "Don't make me laugh. The healers said to let their magic set till tomorrow." He shook his head as he relaxed back. "You sound like Will. He likes to help in general, but thinks I have a problem. But my only problem is that I don't pick and choose what's worth my intervention. Whenever I see someone who can't help themselves, I have to do something."

*"Even if it kills you?"*

"It hasn't yet."

"But it so easily can! If not for the fairy healers, it might have this time!"

"Briar, if I don't do it, no one else will. And I can't live with knowing that something preventable had come to pass, just because I didn't stop it."

He'd also said something similar before, and I'd waved it off as a criminal justifying his wrongdoing, or trying to convince himself he was good. But seeing his face now, he was genuine. He felt an inordinate amount of responsibility towards the common man, something not even my father felt that passionately, and he was the nominal *Father of the Realm*.

"So that's why you took me with you? Not for any gift of gratitude from my influential father, or pardon I can negotiate for you?"

"I don't need a pardon," he dismissed. "I did nothing wrong."

"The law says you did."

"Being against the law is not synonymous with being evil," he said, a fervent note entering his melodic voice. "Lots of laws are unjust to begin with, or easily exploitable by people with bad intentions. The law did nothing while people's rights were trampled upon, while due process and

judiciary courts were bypassed, and summary judgements and sentences were passed by Prince Jon and his lackeys. It proved it wasn't worthy of being followed."

This was far more intellectual and reasoned than I could have expected him to be. But then it was clear by now everything I'd heard of Robin Hood had been greatly misinterpreted and misreported.

"Sounds like you want to quit being a green bandit, and go into law reform."

"Just the ones involved with 'internal affairs.' But I can't, so I have no choice but to act outside them." He flashed me a smug grin. "And I prefer 'verdant vigilante.'"

A laugh escaped me, and I rushed to cover my mouth. "Alliterative. Alan should add it to one of his songs."

"He's made enough ballads about my escapades. At this point, they can fill a book."

"Could they be condensed into a play?" I suggested, excited by the idea. I'd often fantasized about adapting the larger-than-life events in my family's lives, and now my own, to the stage, even knowing it would never come to pass. But with ballads already written about him, and his exploits and character having all the hallmarks of great entertainment, it wasn't so impossible in his case. "*The Verdant Vigilante* would be quite popular as either an opera or a play."

"How about they meet in a middle ground and become a musical?"

"A musical?"

"Never heard of musical theater?" I shook my head, and he sat up, looking more animated. "It's a new art form we saw in towns along the frontline. Halfway between a play and an opera, with the singing being less about vocal acrobatics and more about memorable tunes and lyrics. And, well, more about understanding what you hear, rather than being assaulted by singers competing over who could be the loudest."

To be fair, loudness served a purpose when theaters weren't built to prioritize acoustics. Now, it had become a pointless, competitive requirement that I resented.

"How come I've never heard of musical theater?"

"Probably because it was made for those who can't afford opera houses. It's the natural evolution of folk songs and ballads."

I sighed dreamily. "I'd love to find out what those musicals are like. As much as tainting traditions is reviled in my circles, some change does turn out to be for the better."

Like how much easier it had been for me to move around without a hoop-skirt and a corset after my return from Cahraman. Mother had informed me she'd heard that people were mocking me for wearing "fancy undergarments" or "scullery maid" fashion. I hadn't cared. Opulence and propriety had nearly gotten me killed in Mount Alborz. And I hadn't wanted to spend what could be my last days suffocating in their confines. Good thing, too. If I'd been in one of those contraptions when I slept, my spirit would be wading in one now.

Robin grinned. "See? Now you agree with my methods."

"I wouldn't say I agree with your thieving, just that your heart appears to be in the right place. But there are better ways to go about reform."

"Ways that are out of my reach." He mimed grabbing at thin air, before sitting back with a sigh. "Then again, most things are."

"Is that the reason behind your love of projectile weaponry?"

His eyebrows shot up, before he grinned. "It just might be. It's also a good way to avoid being stabbed in sword fights, and scare opponents from a safe distance."

"What an ironic strategy. You use arrows to avoid being stabbed, but you throw yourself where you can get your head literally bitten off."

“And this is precisely why my army captain made me a marksman and not a strategist.”

“Apart from that notable incident, from what I’ve seen so far, there’s nothing wrong with your strategies.”

He seemed surprised, and pleased, at my commendation. “My plans are not always the best, but they do eventually hit their mark.” His grin melted into a frown. “Which might explain my inadvisable compulsion to help everyone, no matter how detrimental to other goals it is.”

“As commendable as your efforts are, you don’t seem happy when you talk about what you do.”

“My happiness doesn’t matter, and it shouldn’t be a factor in one’s duty.”

I exhaled deeply. “That is a sentiment I am overwhelmingly familiar with.”

“Because as a noblewoman, you were raised to be some powerful man’s wife?”

I sat at the foot of his bed, tension flaring up my neck, like the teasing beginnings of a headache. “You make it sound almost—vulgar.”

He rolled his eyes. “It’s the root of your problems, isn’t it?”

“I don’t recall telling you anything of the sort.”

“You didn’t need to. It’s obvious in how you think anything that could ruin your chances of being perceived as the perfect bride is bad.”

I looked away, feeling embarrassed all of a sudden. “That was because everything depended on my being chosen by a—powerful man. It would have benefited not just my future children, but my family, and everyone dependent on them. I grew up believing my very life depended on it.”

He said nothing, just nodded, encouraging me to say more.

No one had ever really wanted to hear what I thought, or considered I might have thoughts that were different from what I was taught to say.

I smiled bitterly. “I would never say this to anyone back home, but if I had a choice, I wouldn’t want to be some powerful man’s wife. Or never just that. All it does is make you a target for envy and vitriol. Then there are the boundaries and limitations of what is appropriate, what is expected, and what is out of bounds. It would have been different if the advantages that came with the disadvantages were what I valued or enjoyed or aspired to. But I’ve discovered, they’re not.” I set my hands on my lap, not feeling flesh, but sensing my legs regardless, and they were shaking. “But I have to do it, as it’s the only thing I can do, and what I want doesn’t matter. Like you said, my happiness about it was never a requirement.”

Robin didn’t say anything still. For long, long moments.

When I finally gathered enough nerve to check if he had fallen asleep again, I found him watching me with sad eyes.

Then he finally attempted a smile. “Being a rough-handed, sun-burned farmer sounds very liberating all of a sudden, doesn’t it?”

I huffed a mirthless laugh. “That’s taking it a little bit too far for me. But I suppose that kind of life comes with a lot less surveillance, judgment, and just more space, in every sense of the word.”

I couldn’t help thinking of Cora again. Her mother was the Mistress of the Granary, a fertile region south of Arbore that fed a huge part of the Folkshore. It was an inherited matriarchal title that carried no noble blood or rank, like a benevolent dictatorship, if there were such a thing.

She had arrived in Cahraman with the possibility of becoming a future queen, and all she’d done was moan and groan about wanting to return to her fields and animals, where she was useful and in control. But she’d still moved through her day with the confidence of a wealthy lord’s son, unbowed by the opinions of others, the sway of superiors, or threats of any sort.

In one of my least dignified moments, right after she’d saved me, too, I’d threatened her with the

power I wielded as a princess. She'd decimated my claims with indisputable facts that had shown me how little I knew of how the world worked on every level, and how little impact I had on anything.

This rough-handed girl with dirty feet and unfiltered speech, who ate with her hands and fought with them, too, was the antithesis of what I was.

And how I envied her.

I envied her freedom, inside her own mind before anything else, and her confidence in her role in life. Like me, she had her destiny preordained for her, as she was born to run the Granary. But unlike me, whatever she did while she did it, would be her choice.

Robin waved a hand in front of my face, regaining my attention. "All right then, how about we don't go that far? How about a middle ground status, sort of like what musicals are?"

I exhaled dejectedly. "What would a human musical be?"

His vivid eyes twinkled with mischief, and I got the impression that he was trying to tease me out of my funk. "To rephrase: Being a hard-working, mid-ranking professional sounds very liberating all of a sudden, doesn't it?"

"And being a nobleman with legislative influence sounds very attractive now, doesn't it?" I fired back.

His lips twisted sardonically. "Funny how you'd rather be lower down the ranks to have the opportunity to just be yourself." He tugged at the pointed tip of his ear. "While my very nature and lower rank mean I never have the opportunities to achieve what I believe in."

And both our wishes would never come to pass.

Even if I survived, it would be to become what I could no longer imagine being. I'd never pursue any of my passions, as they're not part of the job I'd been primed for since birth. While he couldn't hold any position with his fey blood. Not before Bonnie, as Arbore's first fairy queen-consort, normalized fairies among the nobility and gentry, probably decades from now.

"It's not funny, it's sad," I said, shoulders drooping.

"You'd be surprised how often people laugh at misery, be it theirs or anyone else's."

"That sounds like a fairy trait."

"Fairies are people, too. They just don't lie to themselves about who they are. There's a lot of humans like them, but they just don't have the power to reveal themselves. If they get it, they become Prince Jonquil and his circle of sycophants."

"You have a lot of hate for that man."

"No less than your hatred towards the fairy who cursed you."

That might have been true once. But I no longer had any capacity to expend on my hatred of the Spring Queen.

I played with my hands in my lap, feeling their shape, structure, but no warmth, no blood, no skin—like I was a hollow sculpture.

That was how I'd felt, for a very long time, in every way: hollow.

"I just want this over and done with."

"If all goes well, that could be tomorrow for you." He was trying to sound cheerful, for my sake, judging by how closely he watched me. "You get whatever it is you need from King Theseus, and we get Marian's whereabouts, and you'll be rid of me."

I did a double-take at that statement. For some reason, I didn't like the idea of him disappearing, not one bit.

As I considered a response, an inexplicable longing assailed me, and along with it, the memory of Reynard.



I hadn't allowed myself to dwell on him since the early days outside my body, had actually been suppressing my recollections of him, until I'd felt them fraying.

And I should let them fade completely. Clinging to insubstantial hope was what had me in this dire situation in the first place. I should have admitted that Cyrus wouldn't have me, when he'd initiated the Bride Search. Just as I shouldn't have wasted my last chances with the candidates, hoping for Reynard's return. He was already promised to some girl he'd known for ages, and likely loved. It hadn't mattered that I would have loved for him to be the one. That I would have loved him.

What I wanted and felt had never mattered, anyway.

So it didn't matter that I didn't wish Robin to disappear. He would, all too soon.

"You can't wait to see Marian again, can you?" I said, without meeting his eyes, looking at the lip he'd split again instead.

"You have no idea." Fondness softened its tightness, making me look up. I wished I hadn't when I saw how the thought of her warmed his eyes.

Because some illogical part of me wished that that look was for me.

But as the old saying went, *if wishes were kisses and princes were frogs then we'd all live happily ever after.*

Now I wanted to merely live, happily ever after not expected—or even possible.

## CHAPTER SEVENTEEN



Time in the Summer Court moved in a way I couldn't conceive.

But that might be because I was, technically, dreaming. Or as Robin had put it, in a dream-self state. Dreams warped the perception of time, making a minute feel like an hour. The lone day we'd been here felt like an unending week of sunshine.

Being whatever I was now, I didn't need rest, and was unhampered by barriers. So while my companions slept and recuperated, I charted the Summer Palace. And all the time, I rethought my conversation with Robin.

In retrospect, I had made several mistakes. I'd been too honest with him, too open, in a way I'd never been with anyone. As painful as the topic had been, I'd never felt more comfortable expressing it, not even to myself.

Was this some fairy aura I'd been affected by? An influence that loosened my tongue, my reservations about him, and my guilt about the bitterness I felt towards everything in my life?

There was also the question of why he was the only one who could see me until we arrived in Faerie.

I'd first thought his fairy blood explained it, before I remembered that Keenan had made no note of me. So perhaps it was fate? That Robin had seen me, because he'd been meant to help me?

Whatever it was, it wouldn't matter after today.

He'd done his part, and he'd be gone.

Unable to dwell on what today would bring, I circled the pearl palace, weaving in and out of its magnificent hallways and chambers, watching sunrise, midday, and afternoon, but no sunset framed in every window I passed. By the time I doubled back to the quarters we were given, it was time, finally, to meet the Summer King.

"You didn't sleep!" Agnë exclaimed as soon as she saw me.

"She's already asleep, moron," Meira grouched.

"How am I supposed to remember that when she's clearly conscious? Does this even count as sleep?"

"That's literally what the curse is!"

"But she's been awake for who knows how long!" Agnë argued, wiggling with wound-up agitation. "Her mind must be exhausted!"

"You don't sleep because your mind is tired, but because your body is, and hers has been sleeping for weeks!"

Weeks. So I'd been in Briarfell for weeks. If Robin's theory was correct about the connection between my body and spirit being severed over time, I could only hope today would be the day I reunited them.

I cut off their oncoming slap-fight. "As much as I find your debate of my condition informative, I'd appreciate it if you stopped talking like I wasn't here."

A door slammed open on the other side of the hall, and Will's voice boomed mid-rant. "...and in one stupid move you undid years' worth of effort to keep his identity a secret!"

Jon, who looked as good as new, swiped at Will's head. "Enough already! I already told you his wounds couldn't have been treated without pulling that enchanted hood off. Only one of us could have done it, and if I didn't, he'd be dead now! Is that what you wanted, Scarlett? You'd rather see him dead than exposed?"

So the hood was enchanted. That was why it so completely obscured his face and remained firmly on his head no matter what.

"Is he always this annoying, or is this a special time for him," Meira said snidely, as we met the men halfway down the hall.

Jon nodded, to which question, I couldn't guess. He bid me a distracted good morning before focusing on Agnë.

It felt strange, how men who didn't know me as a princess prioritized the acknowledgment of others before me. It was nice, actually. Honest. They weren't forced to show me deference they didn't feel, or to stuff my ears with empty nothings. Like those who needed to curry favor with my family had, hoping to trade my goodwill for whatever they truly wanted.

"How are you feeling today?" Jon asked, gaze intense and contrite.

Agnë blushed, shoulders meeting her earlobes. "Better, thank you. And you?"

"I'm fine, those fairies know their business." He looked torn for a moment, before he blurted out, "I should have been the one to fight the ghouls off you, but..."

Meira had to wedge herself into their moment. "Shouldn't you be asking the rest of us how we feel too, big man? We went through that harrowing experience as well."

"You didn't almost get eaten," Jon dismissed, before bending to offer Agnë his arm. She clutched it eagerly as he led her away.

"And she can't feel anything," Will added, gesturing towards me. "No offense."

"I do feel some things." But I refrained from telling him what the ghouls had made me feel.

"You talk to her like that again, and I'll give you a real flattering haircut with one of your stupid knives," Meira threatened.

Will glowered down at her. "Big talk for such a small girl. What are you, a gnome?"

Meira, ever the hothead, launched herself at him, calling him an uncouth imp. Having long run out of patience, I phased through their outstretched arms—Meira's as she slapped him repeatedly upside the head, mussing his curly hair, and Will's, as he attempted to stop her landing too many blows.

I trailed the others, gaze lingering on how Agnë's petite form looked against Jon's gigantic one. He was remarkably gentle with her, behaving as if he'd known her for much longer than the short time since they'd met outside my resting place. I hadn't asked how they'd met.

I hadn't asked about anything. About them, since I'd last seen them, or about Leander, and why he'd seemed to disappear, and if he'd still been searching for Reynard...

Traitorous thoughts about my mysterious masked man tried to blast the fog enshrouding them away. I fought them away and they dissipated again, only to entwine with, then be replaced by, thoughts of Robin, and the conundrum that he was. The worst of it was how he made me feel. And

how he behaved towards me.

He hadn't just perceived me when others hadn't, he'd *seen* me. As more than just my form, and the image I projected of myself.

The ideas that fact inspired scared me. I couldn't entertain them, not after similar ideas with Reynard had led to my current condition. I had to steel myself against any thoughts of similarities, or impossible fancies. What Robin and I had discussed yesterday was the truth. Our feelings didn't matter.

I just wished feelings weren't so fickle so I could stop thinking of his face, his expressions, his smile, the gleam in his eyes...

I shook my thoughts away as we were met by an escort with curly, black hair, golden eyes, and a mid-thigh, butter-colored tunic. Curiously, like the other officials I'd seen within the palace, he wore no footwear. It at least made me feel less conscious about my own barefoot state.

"Where is Robin?" I asked the escort, who'd introduced himself as Ikaros. "Is he all right?"

Ikaros did a double-take before realizing I actually was a tad see-through. "Your friend has made a speedy recovery with our treatment, and is in the king's throne room."

It might not be a true breath, but I exhaled in relief, regardless. Though the healers had sealed Robin's wounds, I'd feared the ghouls' bites could have carried deathly diseases. I'd been terrified he might succumb to some horrific infection overnight.

Besides, it would have been something he'd ferociously resent—dying from a bite rather than a fight.

The burbling and tumbling of water accompanied our approach to the throne room. Then we were at towering, polished bronze double-doors engraved with glowing, geometric shapes that pulsed as we neared them, bordered by braided columns that seemed to be both marble and light.

The spear-bearing guards opened the doors for us, and we entered a vast hexagonal hall with a soaring glass ceiling and a veritable waterfall.

There was no indication where the water came from or went to, but it felt as if it was watching us back as we gaped at it, changing colors and velocity.

I was looking around for Robin when the waters parted like a curtain. A set of carved steps appeared, leading into a huge pool of crystalline waters that seemed lit from within. Last to appear was a platform holding two thrones.

The first seemed to be hewn from solid gold, was entwined with vines that undulated and gleamed, and blossoms that seemed to breathe, filling the air with their sweet, tangy scent. And sprawled on it, was the Summer King.

King Theseus had a glowing circlet with a white-gold sun in its center perched on abundant sun-bleached hair that undulated around his shoulders. His shimmering tunic showed an indecent amount of his deeply-tanned, polished skin, exposing his muscled arms and almost all of his chest, and stopping way above his knees. He, also, was barefoot.

Next to him, a gorgeous young fairy woman sat on the smaller, silvery flower-covered throne. She had golden skin like my mother, and earthy-red hair, with big, almond eyes the warm, orange-brown of hazelnut shells.

The possibility of her being his current queen brought the dormant feeling of my bones back with a vengeance, joints stiffening with foreboding.

Then someone emerged from the water, and I forgot all about her, and what her presence could mean to me. Robin!

He climbed up on the platform before the king, wiping water from his eyes, and wringing it from

his cloak.

Running a hand through water-darkened hair, spiking it, he sighed. “Was that necessary?”

The king shrugged nonchalantly. “You may be spoken for by our mutual friend, but I need to be certain of your intentions before I discuss anything with you. These waters cleanse you of anything you may carry, and reveal anything you may hide.”

Robin huffed a mirthless laugh. “You get human troublemakers often?”

“We get our fair share of persistent pirates and reckless rogues, who think capturing one of us means we’ll give them fairy gold. Plenty of determined humans, sorcerers, giants, and halflings such as yourself break in here.” Theseus gestured to the girl on his right. “Some even try to kidnap my sister, Erytheia.”

Sister. So he truly had no queen.

It meant I had a chance!

Theseus clapped excitedly as he turned to beckon us closer. “Dip into the purifying pool, so we can start discussing our bargain.”

Will beat me to asking, “Bargain? What bargain?”

The king cocked his head at him. “You’re here to ask favors of me, are you not? You will bargain for them.”

Robin turned to us with a hurrying gesture, and my heart practically galloped. At seeing his face again, and how pleased he looked to see me.

No. Not me—us. Probably not me at all, and only his friends.

The men went into the pool first, Jon’s shoulders remaining above water where Will became submerged. Soon, he too was fully underwater where the pool deepened, before they both emerged on the other side and climbed beside Robin.

I followed them, setting my foot down on the sparkling waves they left behind. Expecting to sink through the water, I just glided along, as if on rippling sheets of malleable glass.

I was literally walking on water.

A delighted laugh broke the spell of fascination as I looked up, and met Robin’s amused eyes head on.

This time he was certainly grinning at me. Then he spread his hands towards my feet. “Now that isn’t something I was expecting to see, ever.”

Smiling nervously, I glided closer. “And here I thought you’d seen it all.”

“I’m afraid you are just a unique occurrence,” he teased. “I wish you could see what I’m seeing.”

And I wished I could continue seeing him, and the way he looked at me now.

Breaking eye contact as I reached his side, I checked behind me, found the girls right where I left them. I waved them over.

“I can’t swim,” Agnë said, blue eyes huge with dread.

“And I’m, uh...” Meira glanced around as if for a way out. “...allergic to water.”

Before I could respond to that weird claim, Will stopped wringing water out of his clothes. “What are you, a cat?”

“If that makes you a rat, then yes,” Meira snapped at him.

“Want me to carry you across, Miss Agnë?” Jon offered.

“No,” the king said firmly. “You all cleanse yourselves, or you don’t get an audience with me.”

“We’re not here for anything ourselves,” Meira said, before cowering under Theseus’s gaze.

Cowering? When I’d never known her to show any sign of weakness?

“Then leave the palace,” the king said. “Head back to the Folkshore.”

“What? No! We can’t leave her!” Agnë moved towards the water.

Meira caught her back, hissing, “Don’t be an idiot!”

“Just wash yourselves off, already!” I ordered, a tone I hadn’t used with them in a while. “You won’t drown with everyone around!”

“We can’t,” Meira almost whimpered.

“Then you can’t follow your friends wherever they go from here,” said Princess Erytheia. “It’s as simple as that.”

Continuing on this journey without them was not an option. Even if it ended here for me, I couldn’t have them walk home by themselves. Who knew what else roamed this land that could gobble them up. I needed them to stay with Robin and the others.

“I don’t blame you for being suspicious, but as you can see…” Robin pointed to himself and his sopping-wet friends. “...there’s nothing harmful in the water.”

Meira’s grip on Agnë turned white-knuckled as they both shook. “It’s different for us, and like we said, we’re only asking to accompany her.”

This was getting ridiculous. I’d never known them to be so difficult.

Unless...

“Is the myth about witches melting in water true?” I asked.

“We—we told you we’re not witches,” Agnë stammered.

“The more you resist, the more suspicious of your presence I become. Very well.” Theseus flicked a hand, and both my handmaidens flew forwards and splashed into the pool.

Meira thrashed in the water, screaming. Agnë sank like a stone.

Before anyone could move, Jon flung himself into the pool, creating waves as he dove after Agnë.

In seconds, he surfaced with her in his arm, and caught Meira, too, kicking powerfully towards the platform.

I hovered above them, torn between fear for Agnë, who’d gone totally still, and irritation at Meira, who kept struggling and yelling, “Let me go!”

Jon heaved up from the pool with them in his arms, grunting, “You two are far heavier than you look—”

His words were cut off as he stared down at their hunched forms. I stared, too.

They had their backs to me, and their arms pressed over their heads. And they looked—bigger. *Much* bigger.

“Wh—what happened to you two?” I choked.

Neither responded.

“Answer me!” I ordered shakily. “Face me—now!”

Reluctantly, they rose to their feet and turned to me, and I gasped.

In the space of a minute, they’d grown taller than me, with larger skeletons overall, their skin shining with more than wetness. Then they lowered their arms down to reveal pointed ears. Longer than Robin’s, and on par with the king’s and everyone else in the palace.

It was unmistakable. They were fairies.

## CHAPTER EIGHTEEN



Oldness gripped me like I was the one drenched and dripping, as two terrible thoughts gripped my mind. I groped for the less hurtful one.

These fairies couldn't be Agnë and Meira. I should have known from their unfounded presence outside the castle. What could have my handmaidens been doing so far away from the capital and the palace, anyway? They would have never been able to reach Briarfell alone!

Those two were imposters. And they'd known the waters would expose them.

My voice shook with barely restrained fear and fury. "Who are you, and what have you done with Agnë and Meira?"

The one who used to masquerade as Agnë rushed towards me. "It's us, Fa—Briar, I swear it."

I floated away from her, not wanting to let the other thought take hold.

But it did anyway. This wasn't a totally different creature. This fairy had Agnë's face, just with larger, more accentuated features.

"You—you were fairies all along?" I whispered.

"Yes," Agnë said guiltily, sadness shimmering in her blue eyes, not as big now in comparison to her larger head and distracting ears. "We just couldn't show that to your family, or they would have never let us near you."

"Why did you want to be near me to begin with?" I choked. "Who sent you? The Spring Queen? What have you done to me?"

"Nothing! We came to watch over you and help you!"

I swatted at Agnë's outstretched hand, forgetting that I couldn't touch her. "You expect me to believe that? You've been lying to me for years!"

"We never really lied. Anything anyone believed about us was just their own assumption," Agnë said in a breathless rush. "We didn't even give false names. Your governess mispronounced ours, and we just didn't correct her."

"It's the truth," Meira said somberly, examining her feet, ears sticking out of her wet curls. "We have no allegiance to the Spring Queen, because Agnë is from Winter, and I'm from here."

The Summer King laughed behind us, reminding me we were not alone, and of why I was here in the first place.

"Now *this* proves to be an entertaining start to what should be a fun day." He pointed at Meira. "I knew you looked familiar, Merope! Welcome back! Last I heard of you was when I sent you as my proxy, to bless some human newborn."

They were sent to bless—*me*?

All my thoughts tangled until I cried out, “Just tell me who you really are, no more evasions!”

Agnë looked hurt, but curtsied to me. “I am Lady Agnessa, sister to the Duke of Hardreim of the Winter Court. I gave you the Gift of Song.”

“And I’m Merope of Summer, a courtier here in the palace,” Meira mumbled. “We’re your fairy godmothers, and I...I...” She finally faced me, tears in her dark eyes. “I’m the reason you’re a ghost.”

If I could faint, I would have by now. But all I could do was stare at them, my last years being wiped away and rewritten.

They’d been deceiving me for so long. But why was I surprised when my own parents had hidden the truth from Leander and I for longer, claiming they had no role in our curses?

Robin advanced on Meira, his expression thunderous. “You’re the one who cursed her, not the Spring Queen?”

“No! Never!” Meira exclaimed. “I made the *amendment* to the queen’s curse, that she should sleep instead of die. I just couldn’t change the terms of breaking the original curse, and it remains how she can be awakened.” Meira looked at me urgently. “The other fairy godmothers who were sent to bless you as a newborn left, but Agnë and I chose to stay and watch over you, and help ensure the breaking of your curse.”

I shook my head, my bewilderment deepening. “But I never saw you before I was ten!”

“We changed our appearances and took jobs around the castle, until you were old enough to have handmaidens,” a tearful Agnë explained. “We came forward then to offer our service. But it was all to care for you, to make sure you survived the queen’s cruel act of vengeance.”

Meira approached with pleading eyes. “I never meant for you to end up this way. I was about to bless you with a gift when the queen arrived, and issued her curse. I—I acted hastily before the curse solidified and wouldn’t be amended, so didn’t have time to word it carefully, guarding against developments like this. But I never worried about it since your parents soon made that arrangement for you, and we thought...we thought...”

“You thought I’d never succumb to the sleep anyway, because I had a foolproof method of breaking the curse?”

They both nodded vigorously, and Meira rushed to add, “But when it fell apart, and we couldn’t find a replacement, I never thought you wouldn’t completely sleep, body and spirit. Then you were taken away, and we had to find where you were being kept, and Briarfell was our last place to look. That was when we met the others, and you know the rest.”

I looked between them, wonder replacing betrayal and suspicion, as I at last breathed, “You really are my fairy godmothers!”

“Two of them at least,” Agnë mumbled, voice thick with tears.

“We’re the only ones doing our jobs, so we’re the only two that count,” Meira sneered, sounding more like her old self. The self I knew, anyway.

Agnë poked her. “That’s not fair to the others.”

“Well, life isn’t fair, as evidenced by my mess-up.”

Before that starter spat developed, I raised my hands. “Is there anything else you’ve neglected to tell me?”

“Nothing I can think of,” Meira said, her attempt at appearing sweet making me grimace.

Agnë raised her hand. “I’m almost certain that Amabel can read minds! And if this doesn’t work—” She pointed at the king. “—the King of Winter is another possibility! He’s unattached and very nice, and I can arrange the meeting myself, since my brother Simeon is his closest friend.”



I frowned at her. “Someone should have dunked you in a magical pond months ago, when I needed to be privy to this information—and was awake!”

They both hung their heads, before we all swung around in alarm when King Theseus’s voice crackled over our heads like a whip. “As entertaining as these revelations are, you are wasting a king’s time.”

When we all faced him, Robin was so close, my shoulder went through his. I caught Will giving Meira an amazed if alarmed look. Jon, on the other hand, seemed delighted at Agnë’s seismic growth spurt, whispering to her, “It’s a relief to feel I won’t crush you by mistake anymore.”

“Your Majesty,” Robin said, drawing all our attention back to the moment we’d almost died to obtain. “We are two parties here, with requests that lives depend on.”

“And the first one is?” the king prompted.

Will took a hasty step forward. “My sister, Marian, was taken by the Wild Hunt last spring. We haven’t been able to enter Faerie to track them, since the war closed the borders to us. When they were opened, Nexia wouldn’t let us cross. We’ve only been able to come since Robin discovered a new fairy path in Briarfell. If you could tell us where the Wild Hunt are and if they have her, and if Marian is well, we’d greatly appreciate it.”

“And the second request?” Princess Erytheia addressed us—me and my fairy godmothers.

That fact was going to take some getting used to.

I approached the king and princess, projecting the confidence I’d been trained to display since childhood, addressing them with the graciousness I always greeted visiting royals with. “Your Majesty, Your Highness, I have come here seeking freedom from an unjust curse, and I believe only His Majesty can help me.”

“I was wondering what you are.” Theseus chuckled, resting his square jaw in his palm, watching me with smarmy, golden-green eyes, lounging in his seat like a big cat in a tree. “How can I help you?”

Here I was, right before the only remaining possibility to rid myself of this lifelong burden and its life-ending manifestation—since I doubted I’d have time to seek Agnë’s king—and I couldn’t phrase my request. Standing before him, pinned by his expectant gaze, I had lost all power over my voice.

What was wrong with me? Why couldn’t I say it?

“Hey,” Robin whispered softly, “Look at me.”

I did, and found his singular face very close, and already very dear.

“Tell me what you’re here for.”

“You know,” I whispered.

“Not really.” His gaze grew intense and encouraging. “How can he break the curse? Tell *me*.”

“If the king agrees to declare his love for me, and to say he would make me his queen,” I wheezed, barely audible.

King Theseus burst out in bellowing laughter, making my conflicted mood sink even lower. “Of all the things humans have come bursting in here for, this is the first time one has asked for my hand.”

“Is it available?” Robin asked, the snap of worry in his voice cutting off the king’s mirth.

The king regarded him shrewdly. “It is, but the question is, why should I give it to her?”

“Yes, what does she have that’s worth a fairy king?” Erytheia added.

But reluctance to expose myself struck me mute again. The moment I did, Robin would no longer be my—my...

What was he? My champion? My...friend?

Whatever he was, I’d lose his goodwill, and he’d never look at me like this again.

“You had a plan to negotiate this, right?” Robin urged

“I do, but I can’t tell *you*...”

“Now’s not the time to persist in your secrecy.” When I still didn’t say anything, he pinned me with a grim stare, and added, “Fairuza.”

## CHAPTER NINETEEN



Whether I was tied to my body's breathing or not, I let out a startled, painful hiccup. "How did you—"

"Not important now," Robin dismissed, urgency written all over him. "But *you* are, Fairuza, Princess of Arbore. *That's* your bargain."

I knew that. It was my only hope here. But I had been willing not to use my title to entice the king, just so Robin wouldn't know.

But he did, so I had nothing to lose.

Forcing myself to face Theseus again, I said, "I am Princess Fairuza of Arbore, and in marrying me you secure a bountiful alliance with your closest neighbor on the Folkshore, and one of its most powerful kingdoms."

Theseus looked mildly impressed. "You ladies are full of surprises today. But since both parties are asking me to impart valuable information and make a difficult decision, rather than hand them a magic sword or a griffin or the like, I'm afraid I'm going to have to ask you to win my favor in exchange for my help."

There was always a catch with these creatures, wasn't there?

I nodded curtly. "Name your price."

"Would it be objects or actions?" Robin asked. "Because if you want me to steal something for you, that could take a while."

Amusement danced in the king's cat-like eyes, as blindingly white teeth emerged between thin lips in a devious smile. "Since there are six of you, I'll be splitting you up in pairs, and giving you tasks to fulfill. One for my entertainment, one to spare my sister from a bargain I want to break, and the last for my own benefit."

Without a moment's hesitation, Robin and I spoke in unison, "Agreed."

"And—begin!" Theseus clapped his hands, and ropes of pulsing yellow light tore between us, separating Robin and me from Agnë and Jon, and them from Will and Meira.

Meira backed away from Will. "I am not partnering with him!"

The king grinned at her. "Yes, you are. That's your penance for leaving my court for hers without my permission." A thunderous clap of his hands elicited a blinding flash. When it faded, Meira was tied spreadeagled to a red-and-white wheel of fortune, and Will was blindfolded. "You both seem to be very tense, and killjoys. So, your task is to unwind enough to play this game."

"What game is this? Making me spin until I puke?" Meira screamed, her voice vibrating as the

wheel started to rotate.

“Why am I blindfolded?” Will cried out, tugging on the red cloth on his eyes to no avail.

“You will test your aim by throwing knives at the wheel before you,” the king said, sounding disgustingly pleased with himself. “If you hit Merope, you don’t get the location of the Wild Hunt.”

A hiccup of fright escaped me, echoed by Agnë’s.

Will shouted in horror, “Absolutely not! I need to see to throw!”

“If you want to execute me, why don’t you just say so?” Meira wailed mid-spin. “What’s the point of this game?”

Theseus shrugged, draping himself over one side of his throne. “That I find it funny. You’re entertaining me, remember?” He gestured again, and a table full of throwing knives appeared at Will’s hip, as he taunted, “Don’t you want to test your skills? See if they are enough to find—Marina, was it?”

“*Marian* wouldn’t want me to find her at the cost of someone else’s life,” Will seethed, still struggling with his blindfold.

Theseus examined his nails idly. “If you don’t play, you will be banned from Faerie forever.” He tossed a careless gesture Meira’s way. “And *she* will be executed.”

Will worked his jaw, and felt around the table, picking up the nearest knife. As he ran his fingers over it, examining its heft and sharpness, I could practically feel him considering throwing it at the king instead.

My heart hammered, hoping he wasn’t that much of a hothead. That king could kill him, kill them all, with a flick of a finger. He’d put Will, put us all, in an impossible position.

Then Will finally faced the spinning wheel.

“Don’t you dare throw that knife,” Meira shrieked.

“I have no choice,” Will said tightly. “He’ll kill you if I don’t.”

“So you’d rather kill me yourself?” Meira wailed.

“You have a better chance with me.” His lips wobbled in an imitation of a smug grin. “Don’t worry. I’m the best.”

Then he raised the knife and Meira sobbed, squeezing her eyes shut. I did the same as he flung the blade.

Robin’s groan of relief harmonizing with Agnë’s keening sprang my eyes open again.

Meira continued spinning and sobbing, with the knife stuck an inch away from her left ankle.

Will expelled the breath he’d been holding. “There—now let her go.”

King Theseus only grinned. “You still have five knives to go.”

“You can’t be serious!” Will bellowed. “You really want me to kill her for you, don’t you?”

The king shrugged. “I want you to prove yourself worthy of vital information. It’s only fair.”

“You wouldn’t know fair if it bit you in the...!”

“Willoughby!” Jon’s rumble cut Will off. “Not a good time to be mouthy.”

“Just throw the knives,” Robin urged. “You know you can do it. You *are* the best.”

Gritting his teeth, Will picked up two more knives. Meira’s struggles became frantic, making the wheel spin faster.

Will tilted his head, listening for the wheel’s rotation, then bit off, “Stop moving! You’re making this harder on us both.”

“*I’m* the one getting skewered here!”

“Meira. Merope.” Will raised his hands with the knives. “You’re *not* getting skewered.”

“You don’t know that!” Her shriek distorted in the wheel’s zooming spin.

“Just trust me, all right?”

And wonder of wonders, at Will’s firm yet pleading order, she gradually ceased her struggles.

The spinning slowed, and Will seemed to be listening for the right moment, before he flung the second knife, then the third. They landed at both her sides, each missing her by mere inches. The fourth and fifth knives stuck by her ears.

When he picked up the final knife, the wheel suddenly spun faster than it ever had before, making Meira blur.

“What are you *doing*?” Will shouted at the king.

King Theseus flicked a nail. “Those could have been lucky misses. I need to make certain you’re actually that good.”

Will looked aghast, voicing my furious frustration with this demented king. “Who misses, and that accurately, five times in a row?”

“Stranger things have happened.” The king winked at me. “Like the half-dead princess who’s here for my hand in marriage.”

Groaning loudly, Will sounded at his wits’ end.

Meira’s voice vibrated through her spins. “What are you waiting for?”

“Oh, now you don’t think I’ll skewer you?” Will scoffed.

“You told me to give you my trust, and now you have it,” she wailed. “Throw that blasted knife!”

Will only nodded and tilted his head, listening for the rotations. Then he breathed deeply, chest expanding. He tossed the knife with his exhale.

The wheel came to a harsh stop, wrenching Meira violently against her restraints, before jerking her back to the center. The last knife was an inch beside her right cheek, buried in her disheveled hair.

The blindfold slipped down Will’s face, and Meira’s restraints faded, dropping her from the wheel. She slumped on her side, making no attempt to get up, nauseated moans trailing out of her.

Agnë and I tried to rush to her, but the intangible ropes of light between us kept even me in my place.

Will knelt by her side, trying to help her sit up. “Are you all right? I didn’t nick you anywhere?”

She moaned, her face almost green. “The world won’t stop spinning, I think I need to—” She lurched to the side and threw up.

“You’ve had your fun!” Will scowled up at the king as he tried to soothe Meira. “I’ve done what you asked, now tell me what I want to know.”

“Oh, you only earned one answer: the location of the Wild Hunt,” Theseus said smugly. “But that will mean nothing without your sister’s location, which might not be with them, not to mention her condition. Then there’s my decision regarding Princess Fairuza’s offer. Those still need to be earned. But—great job!”

Will looked ready to launch himself at him and stab him come what may, but the king only clapped, and the floor beneath us moved with the force of an earthquake.

“You’ve entertained me. And now, you’ll rid me of a problem. A *big* one.”

At Theseus’s booming announcement, the platform beneath us plummeted, unbalancing everyone except for me. Then the throne room blinked out.

## CHAPTER TWENTY



Next blink, we were somewhere blindingly bright, platform and thrones and all. After my vision adjusted, I saw we were where the grassy palace gardens ended, and the paved, pearly-stone passages began, and stretched through the open palace gates into the circular city below. Horses were grazing in the distance, and among them were our steeds, including Amabel.

Before any of us could ask the king what we were doing here, the earth shook again, this time with what sounded like—advancing steps?

I didn't need to wonder long as a massive man appeared through the gates.

Jon might be gigantic for a man, but this was a real giant.

Even I felt his thudding steps in my bones, until he came to a stop before the platform, towering above us, blocking out the sun. I could barely see his coarse features within his silhouette against it.

"Theseus," the giant bellowed. "I've given you enough time to get your affairs in order. Now the time has come for you to give me my bride!"

My gaze swung to Princess Erytheia. Gone was all her regal composure, and she looked ready to bolt.

Theseus placed a placating hand on hers, before he rose to his feet. "You're right, Akropos. But you'll have to partake in our tradition of wrestling the eldest male of the bride's household first. If you win, you carry my sister up to your home in the mountains."

Princess Erytheia quailed as Akropos advanced, eyeing her greedily. "Let's do this, then. I will crush you."

Theseus grinned mischievously up at him. "Unfortunately, with me being the king, that's not an option. But I will nominate a proxy." He pointed at Jon. "Him."

Akropos the giant didn't give any of us a chance to react, before he descended on Jon with a terrifying roar.

Jon hit the paved ground with a slam that made my own phantom ribs hurt.

Akropos stomped down his foot. A second before having his head squashed, Jon rolled out of the way, springing back up, hands held up in front of his face in a boxing parry. The giant swung at his head, but Jon ducked to the side before jumping to throw his own punch.

It landed on Akropos's chin with enough of an impact to throw him off balance. Jon followed up with a barrage of punches to the giant's gut, what I felt would have brought an oak down. They did make Akropos stumble back and crash to the stone-paved ground with an earth-shaking thud.

Jon charged his opponent, not giving him a chance to get up, plowing into his ribs with fists and feet. The giant crawled away, straining as he propped his hands on the grass, his blood vessels rising up against his skin, as thick as the roots of a small tree. Then he sprang back to his feet, catching Jon in a headlock.

We all cried out, each no doubt thinking he'd snap Jon's neck. But Jon twisted the giant's arm away, before jumping up to slam his forehead against Akropos's nose. Bright red blood sprayed from his nostrils.

At Robin's and Will's raucous cheers, I looked at them, bewildered. "What are you cheering for? It's not like he knocked him out."

"Drawing first blood is a good sign," Robin said excitedly. "It means whatever you're fighting can be defeated."

The giant reached for Jon's throat again with a roar, but Jon only tore his hand away, and pulled his fingers apart violently. As Akropos bellowed in pain, I finally realized the struggle was, shockingly, not evenly matched. In Jon's favor. Jon was the far better fighter, and he was a lot stronger than I'd given him credit for.

Jon soon had Akropos on all fours in a chokehold, and nothing the giant did budged his grip. The giant looked like he was about to pass out, strained again, and the veins in both his legs and arms popped out like earlier. Suddenly, he tore himself from Jon's chokehold, and clamped his own hands around his throat. Jon gasped for breath, his attempts to escape the giant's grip failing completely this time. I clearly knew nothing about fighting, and had severely miscalculated his chances.

"No!" Will yelled furiously. "How did he do that?"

"He's cheating somehow!" Robin shouted, as angry and terrified for their friend.

"The only one cheating here is the king, when he pit Jon against something so large, he barely reaches his shoulder," I hissed. "He put him in a fight he can't win!"

"Jon *was* winning," Robin growled. "Size doesn't win fights, maneuvers do. And Jon had found out the giant's weaknesses, was taking full advantage of them, until just moments ago."

As Jon's legs started buckling underneath him, Agnē shrieked his name and started running to him at the same moment his friends did.

"No!" Princess Erytheia shouted, shaking as she watched the uneven struggle with unblinking eyes. "This is my life they're fighting over. If any of you interfere, it will be considered cheating, and Akropos wins by default! He takes me to his mountains, and both of your quests fail."

As the others stopped, besides themselves with rage and futility, I noticed those veins spreading across the giant's legs again, and a desperate idea blossomed in my mind.

"So, cheating ends the fight in the opponent's favor?" I asked Erytheia.

"Yes," Erytheia said, looking as terrified as all of us.

Jon finally managed to tear away from the giant, spitting blood, panting, face pale. Then he hurtled back at Akropos, slamming against him with a force that should have at least made him stumble, like it had earlier. Akropos didn't budge this time.

I made the same observation, and it solidified the idea in my mind.

Robin had been right. He *was* cheating. And I knew how.

"Robin!" He tore his eyes off the fight at my shout. "If this Court is Orestia's cognate, and this giant is native to this land, he is different from the giants Jon belongs to in the Northlands."

"What does that *matter*?"

He turned away to the fight, eyes feverish with rage and helplessness, and I floated around him, forcing him to look at me. "It matters because the giants in the Old Tales of Campania and Orestia are

not a large race of humanoids like the Northlander giants. In all their stories, they are born from the soil of the mountains fully-formed—and they get their strength *directly* from it.”

Robin’s eyes rounded as he got my meaning, his face morphing from confused to outraged. “I knew it! I knew he was cheating!”

I nodded. “Every time Jon bested him, he sucked so much power from the earth, his veins bulged with it. But from what I noticed, he has to be directly touching the soil—the grass, not the paved ground—with his hands or feet!”

The appreciative smile he gave me made a warm feeling spread up from my gut to buzz around my heart, before he suddenly said, “Yell at me.”

“Huh? Why?”

“Because if we yell your discoveries to Jon, that would be interference, and therefore cheating according to those weird fey rules, and Akropos wins. But if we yell them in a fake debate...”

“...Jon overhears us, and finds out how he can win,” I finished for him, suddenly excited, though I found this strategy familiar.

Before I could think where I’d heard something like it before, he gave me a nod, and started shouting, “I told you size doesn’t win fights!”

I was taken aback by his loudness, but instantly caught on, yelling back even more loudly, using my opera training, what I’d recently denounced as pointless. “And you told me Jon is a giant! Doesn’t look like a giant to me now!”

Wincing at my volume, but giving me a quick, approving grin, Robin roared back, projecting his voice like I did, “I said he is half-giant! And there are *many kinds of giants*, Fairuza!”

Hearing him say my name again sent a surge of emotion rushing through me, energizing me into being the loudest I’d ever been. “That’s what I mean! You don’t just say ‘giant’! You have to be specific! Human giants like your friend here, are nothing like the earth-giants that live in environments like this one—because those *derive their power only from the soil*, you halfwit!”

Satisfaction fizzed through me when I tossed that specific insult at him. From the quirk of his eyebrow and lips, I could see he remembered when he’d called me that, and appreciated my retaliation.

Our screaming match had clearly reached Jon’s ears, and he’d figured out what we were trying to tell him. He abruptly ceased his efforts to wrestle with Akropos, and went for his middle.

With bulging muscles and a roaring heave, Jon hoisted the giant’s feet off the grass—and the effect was instantaneous.

Akropos’s struggle weakened fast, until all he could do was attempt to unbalance Jon with his dead weight, a desperate attempt to land back on his feet. Jon only bent backwards, raising him higher, putting more distance between the giant and his source of power.

When Akropos had grown almost limp, Jon tightened his arms with a triumphant roar, and the sound of cracking ribs made us all flinch.

Theseus, who’d been watching silently all the time, rose, and with a powerful spin, Jon tossed Akropos onto the paved ground at his feet.

Jon doubled over, panting. “If magic boosts are allowed in your fights, you should have given me an enchanted armor or something.”

“They’re not,” Theseus said, his smile so wide it threatened to split his face as he looked maliciously at the giant crumpled at his feet. “Not only were you cheating, Akropos, but you intended to fight me using your earth magic. Do you know what the price for deceiving a king is?”

Akropos rose to his knees, cradling his injured side, seeming more disoriented than angry by his



defeat. “You never said I had to play fair, just to fight for Erytheia’s hand.”

“And you lost.” Erytheia beamed at him spitefully. “And for cheating, we waive any payment you wanted for the gold you brought down from the mountains, including my hand in marriage. That means you get to leave empty-handed, and never come back.”

The giant slammed his fists on the ground, grinding his teeth. “We had a deal!”

“And you failed to meet the requirement by losing this fight.” Erytheia made a dismissive gesture, nose in the air. “What could I need with a giant who needs magic to win a fight, and still lost to a mere man from the Folkshore? That dishonor alone would make a courtier like Merope reject you, let alone the Princess of Summer.”

Theseus sat down again, leaning back lazily in his throne, flicking Akropos a shooing gesture. “Off with you now.”

But Akropos didn’t leave. Not before grumbling through a few more sullen arguments. When he finally left, he stomped away so hard he shook the ground, and slammed into Jon even harder, like a giant child throwing a tantrum.

Agnë’s fairy face twisted in a furious frown I’d never seen before as she rotated glowing hands around a pale blue light. It solidified into an ice ball as large as her head, and she scurried after the giant and tossed it at his. The impact toppled him all the way down to the city below like a boulder, making us all burst into a range of mirth, with the royal duo laughing the hardest.

“That was surprisingly petty of you,” Meira slurred, clearly still dizzy, and holding onto Will for balance, who supported her with an arm around her waist. I was so used to her being below my height that the sight of her as tall as Will still didn’t feel like reality.

“It was,” I agreed. “I didn’t know you had it in you to be mean, Agnë.”

“Only to those who deserve it.” Agnë sniffed, creating another ice ball and handing it to Jon. “Put this on your nose, it’ll help.”

“Thank you.” Jon knelt on the ground as if unable to stand anymore, pressing the ice to his face. From this position, he looked up into Agnë’s eyes, and even his pain didn’t affect the gentleness he always regarded her with.

Theseus clapped, regaining our attention. “You’re a more capable group than I thought, and I thank you for ridding us of that humongous pest.”

“Thank us by telling us the information we came for!” Will sniped impatiently.

Theseus shrugged. “I could, if you want me to ignore the princess’s request.”

I couldn’t help the quiver of desperation as I exclaimed, “Why?”

“Because I would answer your requests *after* you’ve performed the three tasks for me. If I answer any now, I’ll forgo yours.”

“No, no!” Meira said urgently, even as Will groaned in the background. “We don’t want that.”

“If so, we come to the task that would benefit me.” Theseus suddenly pointed at me. “It’s your turn to prove yourself.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE



I'd been so caught up in the others' tasks, I'd forgotten I'd be given one myself. But now I'd seen what his tasks involved, there was no way I could perform mine.

I raised my translucent hands to the king helplessly. "But I can't do anything."

A wicked gleam came into his feline eyes. "Nothing at all?"

"I *can* perform something mental, like answer a riddle? Fairies do that sometimes, don't they?"

Not that I was confident I could do that. Not enough to stake my life on it.

Theseus leaned back in his throne, crossing his legs. "Your Highness, I'm afraid the entertainment part of your tasks was already fulfilled, in exchange for something as simple as a report on the Wild Hunt's current location. Ridding us of Akropos's massive nuisance will be awarded the more valuable news of the lady they seek. But you are asking for something infinitely much greater—myself. What you do needs to be grander than a carnival act, or a wrestling match."

He'd given Will and Jon challenges they could manage, because what they asked meant nothing to him. But he wouldn't risk *me* succeeding. He'd ask me something equivalent to crossing a wrym-filled moat with its drawbridge raised, and any attempt I'd make would end with me drowning.

I did feel like I was drowning. Like I had back in the flooded shrine of Anaïta, in the ghoulinfested mountain, struggling to stay afloat with no escape in sight...

"Use me!" Robin's announcement broke through my mounting anxiety. "You used Jon as your proxy, then use me as hers."

"Interesting." Intrigue raised Theseus's fair brows, gaze eagerly moving from Robin to me. "And what do you get out of this? Your friends already won the requests you're here for."

"I get you to play fair, rather than make her lose by default." Robin set his jaw, expression neutral, but he radiated righteous indignation. "I'll do whatever you want as long as you stick to your end of the bargain. If I win, you do what she asks of you, and you break her curse."

The sensation of drowning dissipated, only for my breath to falter under the onslaught of a painful expansion where my heart should be.

"You don't have to do this for me!" I blurted. "It's not what you're here for, Marian is. This is my problem."

Robin only smiled at me. "Weren't you listening to me yesterday? I can't sit by and let something bad happen. I won't."

Never had I wanted to embrace someone more! The fact that I couldn't didn't stop me from attempting to throw my arms around his neck, sobbing, "Thank you," in his pointed ear, over and over.

He set a hand where my back should be, and I could somehow feel it. "Don't thank me yet."

Theseus snorted derisively. "Interesting, indeed. A selfless thief. A true walking contradiction."

It wasn't enough that he put us in this position, he had to dampen the moment Robin and I were sharing. If I were capable of doing magic, I'd want those thorns encircling my castle to sprout around Theseus, and pin him to that throne where he sat, feeling so above us all.

"Would you rather I ask for a price, like your sister's hand as well?" Robin snapped.

Theseus's grin dimmed. "You could, but even if you won, you would never get her."

"And why's that?"

"Because you're a half-breed commoner," Theseus spat. "As my sister said, you're not even worth a courtier, let alone the princess. The blue blood you lack, what Princess Fairuza has through generations of monarchs, is why I'm even entertaining the cause you're choosing to champion."

Disgust assailed me, along with a slew of unpleasant memories. The first time I'd heard the term half-breed had been when my uncle's mistress had referred to my siblings and I as such. That was the first time I'd felt the urge to hit someone in the mouth. Now I wished I could fulfill that desire and smack that regal snob.

But I was being such a hypocrite. Only yesterday I'd almost called Robin that.

But I hadn't. And I'd felt ashamed of thinking it. I'd never think in these derogatory, prejudiced terms about anyone ever again.

Robin had tried to make me utter the word yesterday. Now it had been flung at him, he stood stiff, fists clenched, looking how I felt, barely holding back a retort that could derail everything we'd achieved so far.

Theseus was clearly quite entertained by our futile conflict. The sadist!

And to think he was my hope for survival. The curse had been evil to start with. It was doubly so, for stipulating only men I couldn't bear could break it.

I wished I could just tell him to forget it, and go seek the Winter King. But even if I had the time, with the evidence of my past failures, I couldn't afford to forgo any possibility. More importantly, this wicked trickster would probably deny the others their requests if I backed down now. I was actually afraid, even if I didn't, and Robin lost, he'd reject our requests wholesale.

But there was nothing to do but play his cruel game now.

"Is this what you want, Princess?" Theseus asked. "To put your fate in this half-breed bandit's hands?"

Without hesitation, I bristled, "Yes."

"Keep in mind, if he loses you don't get a second chance."

"I'm well aware," I bit out, my phantom fists clenched.

"Very well. So, Mr. Green Hood, your task is to shoot an arrow at the sun and—"

A commotion suddenly erupted, evidently in the distance, but loud enough to cut that obnoxious king off. Thankfully.

Through the open gates, we could see something dark and large zigzagging through the nearest quarter of the gleaming city below. It was crashing through stalls and smashing into buildings, eliciting a cacophonous chorus of outrage, pain, and fright.

Erytheia sighed. "How many of these things must we deal with?"

Theseus looked down at her sternly. "Until you find a man you deem worthy of you, your spurned suitors will keep venting their fury by sending us such nuisances. The compensations the people petition me for every time is putting a strain on even my treasury." His frown turned into a sudden grin as he turned to us. "Change of plans! We have a new task for my hand, one that's to my benefit in a

different way. Mr. Green Hood, would you call yourself a good hunter?"

"I would. Just give me back my bow and arrows..." Robin stopped as a quiver and bow materialized at his back in a golden shimmer. He reached behind him, fingers trailing over the silver arrows' fletchings.

"I trust those will be satisfactory. Now I want you to rid us of that bull." Theseus pointed towards the city below. "It will send a message to the others, to stop sending us their rampagers."

"Done." Without a second's pause, Robin zoomed towards the gates.

As I watched him recede, terrible realizations started to hammer at me.

This couldn't be that simple. There was no way Theseus would risk his plan to rid himself of *me*, on Robin taking that bull out with a single arrow. It had to be like that earth giant. There must be a trick.

And even without one, I could now see the difficulty in this task. Despite its size, that bull moved much faster than a horse. And Robin was chasing after it on foot. And he'd continue chasing it, even if it killed him. Either the exertion or the bull, or both.

I couldn't let him risk himself again. I had to help him. This time, I could.

I rushed towards the grazing horses, calling for Amabel. The only thing faster than a horse, faster than that beast, was a unicorn.

Like she'd been waiting for the chance, she exploded towards me.

The moment she was beside me, she lowered her neck and I flew up onto her back, and pointed down to the city.

"Looks like we're going on our first hunt, Mabily. Go!"

With an energized whinny, Amabel kicked into a thundering gallop.

In minutes, we'd left the Summer Palace far behind, and were closing the distance to the tirelessly sprinting Robin.

But as we entered the city, I realized this was a quarter we hadn't passed through, and it was no place for speed. Its labyrinthine layout was built on steeply undulating land. Amabel was forced to slow down to keep from crashing into the mayhem the bull left in its wake. Only the bull who cared nothing for smashing into anything could maintain its pace.

Then came the danger of getting lost, and losing track of Robin. The one thing that made keeping an eye on him possible was his vivid green cloak in a sea of light-colored, gleaming garments.

Taking a sharp turn into an even more difficult-to-navigate alleyway, with Amabel's hooves clomping on the uneven cobblestones hard enough for me to feel the vibrations in my ethereal bones, we finally caught up with him.

"Get on!"

At my cry, Robin lost his footing and slammed into a wall.

With a loud groan, he looked up at me. "What are you *doing* here?"

"Helping. Get *on*."

He shook his head. "I've hunted plenty of things like this."

"Theseus is depending on your confidence. There has to be a trick here, since he wants you to lose, so he doesn't have to fulfill his end of the bargain."

"I'll kill it, don't worry."

"And you might kill yourself doing it! You almost died only yesterday, and such effort might reopen your wounds, no matter that they'd been magically healed! Why risk that, if you can ride with me?"

Robin peeled himself off the wall, rubbing his shoulder, the one the ghouls had bitten. "I'll risk it

because he can use your interference against you, and say you helped me cheat.”

“I’m taking that chance, because if I don’t, you’ll definitely hurt yourself!” I pointed behind me with a nonnegotiable snap. “Get on Amabel, now!”

He only started running again, and I screamed after him, “If you don’t care about your life, care about Marian’s. If you lose, this sadist might consider all your requests forfeit. This might be his ultimate trick.”

Swearing furiously, Robin ran back, and swung himself up behind me. I immediately kicked my heels against Amabel’s sides, not needing to have any impact for her to launch into pursuit.

Robin’s body and arms enveloped my form, his hands settling through mine to grip Amabel’s silvery mane as she wasn’t saddled. Though he still went through me, I could feel my outlines within his own, in a surge of closeness and protection.

We exited the alley, made a steep descent down a wider market road. At least most people had now had the chance to hide out of the bull’s rampaging path. And the shattered stands and squashed merchandise were a clear trail for us to follow.

“How are your wounds?” I yelled so Robin could hear me over the cacophony of Amabel’s hooves.

His right hand twitched underneath mine. “Even with the healers sealing them, I can feel them beginning to scar on a deeper level. They’ll probably hurt more in winter. But don’t worry, I can still shoot.”

“I’m not worried about that!”

“I know.” He was silent for a moment, then he said, “I didn’t know you could ride, and like that. You seem like one with your unicorn. And I’m sure it was the same when you had your body. Is it some special connection you have with her, like a witch and her familiar?”

Once, I would have been outraged at such a comparison. But everything had changed the second I’d fallen out of my body. *I* had changed. Maybe long before that.

Now I only said, “I’ve always had a special connection with her. Whether it’s magical in nature, I have no idea. Amabel never displayed any magic—beyond what Agnë is now insisting is mind-reading. But she must like you, if she’s letting you ride her. Before now, she never allowed anyone but me to.”

“So maybe she’s letting me ride her, like she did Agnë, because she knows we’re helping you.”

“That would still mean she knows she can trust you. Whether that’s magic or not, it’s indisputable she is quite intelligent.”

As if to demonstrate, Amabel slowed down without being prompted at the top of a sharply sloping road, carefully trotting down its treacherous slide, finally in direct pursuit of our target.

Now I saw it clearly, it was a lot larger than I had initially thought. Almost as wide as the narrow road it was tearing through, it had a gleaming hide, the dark, oily green of a bog.

Robin moved his arms from around me as he reached for his bow, and I felt the absence of their heat, suddenly remembering what it had felt like to be cold.

Robin stretched behind me, elbow going through my back, legs crossing mine through my phantom dress as he brought the arrowhead near my face.

I felt him exhale as he let the arrow fly, shooting past with an ear-splitting whoosh.

It hit the bull right in the back of its neck—and only bounced off its skin.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO



The bull bellowed, its hooves gouging the cobblestones as it spun to face us. Steam poured from its nostrils as it bent its massive head, lethal horns aimed at us.

It was going to run us down!

“Amabel, run!”

Just as Amabel responded to my tug and veered into a sharp turn, Robin leaned over me, briefly fusing with me as he shot another arrow directly between the bull’s eyes.

Like the last attempt, it didn’t break the skin. This time I saw the arrowhead crumple before the shaft clattered to the ground.

Amabel galloped back up the road, with the bull literally tearing it up as it chased after us. I screamed for the people who’d ventured out to run and hide again as Robin twisted to shoot more arrows at the bull, to no avail.

He finally yelled over the cacophony of hooves, “It’s like I’m throwing paper darts at a wall!”

“Those arrows Theseus gave you must be ineffective!” I yelled back.

“Good point. Let me see—ow!” He hissed and flapped his hand, a streak of blood running down his palm. “No, they definitely work.”

“Did you just stab yourself with that arrow?”

“Just a tiny slice. I had to test its sharpness, and it was either on myself or on a passerby.”

“But if they work, this means—AH!” A hard collision from behind made Amabel neigh sharply in pain, and stumble forwards.

Robin flew off Amabel with the impact, going right through me to slam onto the cobblestones. I could do nothing but watch in horror as they both tumbled down the sloping road.

Robin, being lighter, stopped way before Amabel, who struggled to her feet only once she reached a level stretch. Cold terror drenched me when I saw the blood covering her right hind leg where the bull had gouged her.

Seeming to care nothing for it, she snorted loudly as she lowered her head, watching the bull thundering down the slope at heart-bursting speed.

She meant to meet it head on with her horn!

But if arrows didn’t pierce its skin, a unicorn horn would snap upon impact.

I threw myself before her, waving frantically. “No! You can’t run this one through, Mabily. Don’t even try!”

She wouldn’t budge, and I floated onto her back, pouring everything I had into steering her away.

But the bull was already almost on top of us, and she couldn't dodge it completely. It slammed into us again, and I let out an enraged scream, helpless to do anything to keep it from hurting my unicorn. Any more of this, and it would kill her!

Despite her injury, Amabel galloped away, weaving through the intersecting roads. She was pulling ahead, until we burst into a square full of people. There was no way they'd get out of the way in time, and that bull would gore dozens on its way to us. There was nothing I could do but scream warnings as I tried to steer Amabel round a corner, hoping to hide until the bull passed.

She rounded the corner, only to turn and go back. She'd only been maneuvering her way to another showdown with the bull!

Ignoring my pleas, she galloped on. She was going to ram directly into the bull. Her horn versus his. And I knew she'd lose. He'd kill her.

Tears of helplessness and terror burned me to my recesses as I screamed and screamed for her to stop.

The bull was a few heartbeats away from pulverizing my Mabily, when it suddenly screeched to a halt, its hooves tearing tracks into the road. It was only then my mind understood what I'd seen. A hail of arrows had just bounced off its right flank.

Robin had caught up with us, was letting more arrows fly as he shouted, "I'm the one you're after!"

The arrows hit the bull's head, and with a petrifying bellow, it stampeded straight for Robin. Robin who only tucked his bow back, and shot straight towards it.

Torn between confusion and horror, I screamed incoherently.

Robin only sped ahead, meeting the bull halfway as it charged at full speed, head lowered. I couldn't even close my eyes so I wouldn't see the moment it impaled him and ended his incredible, unique existence.

Then the moment came and I couldn't credit what I saw. Robin leaped into a somersault and gripped its horns. Arcing over it, he landed on its back.

The bull came to another grinding halt, as if unable to understand what had just happened. It and me both.

But the respite was over too soon, and it began to buck violently. Robin seemed to have fused his hands to its horns, keeping himself on top despite its rabid attempts to throw him off.

My voice came apart with agitation as I floated nearer. "Wh—what are you doing?"

"What does it look like?" Robin yelled, in between breathless grunts. "Keeping it from crushing your unicorn!"

"What are you planning to do once it throws you off?"

"Kill it. How? I don't know—yet!"

"Why won't arrows pierce its skin? Is it made of metal?"

"Now I'm here I can tell you it's not." He let go of one horn to draw another arrow, stabbing the beast's head. It snapped in half, and only made the bull redouble its efforts to buck Robin. "I don't feel any enchantments, either. But its hide might as well be armored!" He resumed his two-handed hold on its horns, attempting to steer it. "Any ideas?"

"Me?" I goggled at him.

"Yes, you! I'm having a hard time thinking now, so if you have any theories—I need to hear them."

"Wh—why would I have any? I've never been up against anything like this."

"You and I both know that's a lie! You survived ghouls—and helped us survive them. And you knew how to defeat the earth giant. You can do far more than you give yourself credit for."

But I'd had a lot of help surviving the ghouls. And the earth giant had been a lucky observation, helped with knowledge drilled into me from childhood.

"Just jump off, Robin, *please*," I begged. "We'll go back to the king, and tell him I withdraw my request. I'll beg him to just give you the information you need."

"We do this together, Fairuza—or not at all! Now think!"

He would really rather die trying to prevent me from facing my own fate. And he believed I could help. The least I could do was honor his belief.

My feverish thoughts suddenly slowed down, clarity taking over their processes.

Everything was made a certain way to help it survive where it was created. Ghouls had no eyes because they existed underground, and had sharp talons to dig their way to burial grounds. But they didn't need to be sturdy, since the dead didn't fight back. The earth giant drew its strength from the soil that had birthed it, but once it was cut off from it, it fell harder than anyone else. So that bull's impenetrable hide had to be a defense mechanism developed to protect it from its natural predators. But if it had predators, then it could be killed. We just had to discover its weakness. To do so, we had to think if anything else shared its strengths.

I floated nearer to the raging stalemate and shouted, "Any other armored creatures you know of?"

"What?" The bull took advantage of Robin's momentary distraction, bucked so hard, Robin's whole body lashed up. He slammed back down, somehow still gripping the horns as he gasped, "You mean—like crabs?"

"Yes, crabs!" I cried excitedly. "How do you kill a crab?"

"I'm afraid—I'm out of giant crackers—right now!"

"Can we get it to crack itself against something?"

I regretted the question the moment it left my lips. That monster had demolished half the city without a crack on its hide.

Robin agreed as he yelled, "Unlikely!"

"Then how else do you get through a crab's armor?"

"You're the one who grew up eating that stuff regularly. You tell me!"

I opened my mouth to respond, and another idea burst into my mind. "Maybe it isn't like a crab, but a clam."

"What's with the seafood tangent you're on?" he grunted in pain as he flailed on the monster's back.

"Just listen! A clam is softer on the inside than any other creature, because it relies on its shell for protection. But we don't crush it to access the flesh, we open it with the tip of a sharp knife. At the right place."

"You're saying—this thing could have a very vulnerable interior?"

"I-I think so. Everything has a weakness. It stands to reason this is..."

"That's all I needed to hear," he cut me off as he heaved up to a stand on the bull's back, before leaping into a backwards somersault.

He hit the ground in a crouch, gesturing me urgently towards Amabel, who'd been trying to join the struggle all along. Her bleeding had thankfully stopped, and she seemed raring to go.

I rushed to settle on her back, stretching my hand urgently to Robin.

He only shook his head. "I know how to kill it."

"Did you find a chink in its armor?"

"No chinks, but it has cavities." He readied another arrow in his bow. "I just need it to make it come at me again."



“No! I thought you’d use my idea to do something while you were still on its back, as I feared it would only trample you if you jumped off. Now you did, we have to run away!”

The bull had finally noticed Robin was off its back, and it lost no time in charging back towards us.

Robin squared his stance, his bow drawn taut, arrow nocked and ready. “If anything goes wrong, you make sure you get that stubborn unicorn of yours to run away.”

He meant if he died while trying to kill this monster. “No, Robin—let’s run away—together. We’ll find another way, *please!*”

Without taking his gaze off the bull, he smirked. “This is the best way, right here. Just trust me.”

I did trust him. It was fate I had no faith in. And I couldn’t risk him, not to save my life. *Especially* not to save my life.

“*Please...*”

But it was too late. The bull was close enough for me to hear nothing but its hooves, see nothing but its mass about to trample Robin. Robin who was raining arrows on its snout, as ineffectively as ever.

They must have still hurt, because it opened its jaws, and an enraged bellow cracked through the square like a thunderclap.

The final arrows went right down its pink, fleshy gullet.

Both Robin and Amabel jumped out of the way as the bull crashed to the ground hard enough to shake it. It slid with its monstrous momentum to collide into the side of a building, cracking its side, and bringing chunks of marble and stone showering down the cobblestones.

Finally coming to a stop, it let out one last butchered bellow, then went deathly still.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE



In the deafening silence that ensued, fairy people tentatively emerged from their hiding places. But I could see nothing but Robin. The still-in-one-intact-piece Robin.

With the perpetual sun highlighting his messy, sandy hair, he stood up from examining the bull's expiring body. Giving me a tired, triumphant smile, he approached me and Amabel.

Still reverberating with shock, I stared down at him. "You have a death wish, don't you?"

He shrugged as he exhaled forcibly. "I knew I could do it, once you told me how. That was a clever conclusion you came to. I wouldn't have thought to aim there, if you hadn't compared it to a clam, of all things."

His praise penetrated my fugue, made me beam down at him stupidly. "You would have thought of it eventually."

"We didn't have 'eventually'—we had mere moments before it managed to crush us."

My shock finally splintered into spluttering fury. "Crush *you*! You just stood there in its path!"

"I would have jumped aside if your theory proved wrong."

"You wouldn't have had time!"

"But I didn't need time, since you were right. Now it won't destroy anything ever again."

"Aargh...!" I threw my hands up, knowing I'd get nowhere debating his suicidal tendencies with him.

He reached over, slipping his hand through mine over Amabel's neck, making my heart shudder. "I'm fine, because you came after me. I still can't believe you did."

I couldn't answer, my throat closed, and my heart too full.

He started striding, leading Amabel away. He wouldn't get back on her, saying she could do without his weight with her injury.

We were halfway back to the palace when he suddenly said, "Where *did* you learn to ride like this? I know they don't teach ladies how to ride for hunts and pursuit at court."

Before now, I would have given him some evasive reply. But now he knew who I was, I wanted to share as many truths about myself with him as possible.

"When Amabel was given to me, in spite of my mother's disapproval, she would only let me close to her, even if she was miserable staying in the stall. So I would sneak out to ride her, the way she wanted to. When I got older, I began to race her against other horses, namely my brother's. We always won." I stroked her neck, feeling that familiar pang of love, and of renewed worry for her. "I now believe it was she who taught me how to ride."

He grinned up at me, and it was the best sight I'd ever seen. "So, you do break the rules sometimes! I thought you said physical work was for men, especially peasants."

Embarrassment at my previous oblivious declarations crept up, making me mumble, "This is a sport."

"Not one polite society would train their daughters in, let alone princesses."

"I suppose the rules can be wrong sometimes." I eyed his ears, appreciating their shape, something I'd never thought I'd feel.

But everything I now felt towards him was foreign, and confusing, and so intense, I felt it would burn through my very essence. I didn't know what to make of it, just that I wanted him to keep looking at me like that. Like he was happy he was with me.

"Is that your way of saying you no longer think I'm a menace to the law, and that I had a point?"

"Oh, you're no doubt a menace." I avoided his teasing eyes, adding inwardly, *to far more than the law*. "But I feel if more people had your intentions, and your willingness to help, life would be much better for everyone." A buzz crept up my face as his gaze drained of mirth only to warm with other emotions I couldn't name. If it were possible, I would be flushing pink right now. "I don't know how to thank you, for doing this for me."

"Fairuza, I couldn't have done this without you. I'm the one who should be thanking you for coming after me, otherwise I would have failed you. And if you were right about the king's intentions, and I think you were, I would have failed everyone else, too."

"Then let's just agree to be thankful for each other."

His vivid eyes shimmered with more indecipherable things as they captured mine. "We do make a perfect team. The strategist and the marksman."

"I'm no strategist!" I spluttered.

"But you are. You would make a great one. The way you problem solve, it's very uncommon. And you've made sure our jobs got done. Now Theseus can't back out of our deals."

My heart sang as he spoke of me with such pride. Next moment, it felt like a bird shot out of the sky as it plummeted. I'd forgotten all about the Summer King, and what had brought us here.

This unsavory truth brought more on its heels. I exhaled. "Even if you're right, a princess would never make battle tactics."

"Then perhaps you shouldn't be a princess."

Whatever good mood had lingered was extinguished under a wave of confusion. "What do you mean?"

He looked up, his gaze suddenly earnest. "You have a great mind, a passion for music, and the drive to participate in solving problems, even if it began with the need to solve your own. You have the potential to be so much more than some king's wife, and I wish you could get the chance to be all you can be."

I was again struck mute with the onslaught of emotions I'd never before experienced. For someone else. And for myself.

Before everything had gone wrong in Cahraman, the idea of abandoning everything to chase my true desires was unthinkable. Impossible. I was, like my mother always reminded me, the daughter of a king, the granddaughter of two kings, and would be the wife and mother of kings as well. That had always been my purpose.

But even if I contemplated another path now, another destiny, I couldn't pursue it. I couldn't be a singer or the head of organizations of any sort, nor could I participate in his adventures like Marian had. No matter what I felt towards him, or what he made me feel about myself, my life would end if I

didn't do what was expected of me—both by birth, and by the curse.

Unable to say any of that, I diverted the conversation towards him. “Speaking of what I can be, how did you know who I am?”

Awkwardness tensed his movements, though the good humor remained dominant in his tone. “I know your brother well, and saw him go through his curse. When we met in that castle, I thought you looked familiar, but I couldn't pinpoint the similarity until Theseus mentioned Meira being sent to bless an infant, and she said she amended the curse of the Spring Queen. It all made sense after that—that you were Leander's sister and were cursed by the same person.”

He knew Leander. Not just as the Crown Prince, but personally.

And all the unplaceable pieces, however I'd avoided trying to place them or rejected them as impossible, fit together perfectly now.

I brought Amabel to a halt, finally voicing the truth I'd always known somewhere deep in my heart.

“Reynard.”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR



All remaining ease vanished from every line of Robin's body. Teeth clenching, and eyes widening, he mirrored my cascade of reactions when I was gripped by the certainty of recognition.

Then he finally squeezed his eyes shut and groaned, "Zafira."

After long, long moments of silence, I whispered, "Robin Hood. Reynard. Any other names you go by that I should be aware of?"

"None that matter," he said quietly. "At least this explains another reason why I felt like I knew you."

"I looked for you everywhere that night, and the weeks after. I had only those days left before the curse overtook me, and I still thought—"

I couldn't say it, not to his face. How I'd been so certain he was the one.

"Let's go," I finally said tightly. "If your theory about a time limit to my sleeping curse is true, I can't afford to waste any more."

He seemed about to argue, but I faced forwards, letting him know I couldn't talk anymore. With a dejected exhalation, he pulled his hood up and took over steering Amabel.

Silence reigned all the way back to the Summer Palace. Within its oppressiveness, my mind churned in bitterness and futility.

Fate had thrown him in my path once, making me believe he was the one. Then it had once more, so I would feel all those impossible feelings for him again, even when I didn't know, wouldn't let myself know, he was the same person. It was as if it was making certain I'd feel this way about him, no matter what. And that it would never matter.

It was irony at its cruelest. That the man who'd appeared out of nowhere to save me once, the one I'd spent my last days searching for, was the one who'd appeared as randomly again, to champion the breaking of my curse. And that he'd be the only one who *wasn't* for me. With my luck, I should have realized it sooner. I should accept it.

But I didn't. I was angry. At fate. At him. For sweeping me off my feet, in every way. For connecting with me, then vanishing, making me question my sanity, and risking my survival for him. For appearing again, only for his quest to be for another girl. For not being the one at all, but being the only one I wanted.

But it didn't matter what I wanted. Fate was making certain I believed this once and for all. Regardless of what I felt, I needed someone else to survive. And that was what I was going to get

now. A king. A terrible creature I could never want or even bear.

Somewhere during the storm of misery that had wrecked me over and over, we arrived at the palace. This time, the guards let us through the gates. Robin, or Reynard, or whoever he really was, led Amabel to the platform where our companions, the king, and his sister had remained where we'd left them.

I dismounted from Amabel who was taken away to be tended to. I distanced myself from Robin as Theseus descended from his throne to greet us with open arms.

"I'm impressed! All my guards never slowed that particular beast down. Then you come, a wanted bandit and a cursed spirit, and you actually brought it down."

Neither Robin nor I said anything. I didn't want to talk at all. I wanted to cease to exist.

"I was counting on you losing. But you didn't. And you did do me a great favor. So by my own rules, I have no choice but to honor our bargain. I have already given your companions the information they seek." Theseus came before me and held out his hand for mine. "What do you wish of me then, Princess?"

Despite being boneless, I felt so heavy. Lifting my eyes from my feet to his face alone took all the effort left in me. I slipped my hand over his, feeling nothing. This should have been the moment I'd dreamed of for months. This was exactly what I had come here for. I should be happy. Relieved, at least.

I'd never known such misery.

But this melancholy would pass. Happiness was not a requirement for living.

I snuck one last look at Robin. He looked forlorn, but tried to give me an encouraging smile. The others, especially Agnë and Meira, seemed unable to wait for me to get this over with.

Steadying myself, I attempted to keep my voice from shaking. "I need you to declare yourself to me, say that you love me, and promise to marry me."

With a little bow of his head, Theseus slid his golden gaze over me, and for the first time it seemed he liked what he saw.

Then he cleared his throat, and announced, "I, King Theseus of the Summer Court, love you, Princess Fairuza of Arbore. From here on out, I bind myself to you, and will make you my queen."

My outline buzzed like my skin was awakening from an all-encompassing numbness. Next moment, I felt myself being sucked away from where I stood, the edges of existence blurring. In the span of a blink, the Summer Palace was gone.

It was working! My curse was breaking!

I was going to awaken in my body and be free, be alive and—

Everything went dark.

It could have been in the next blink or in another lifetime that faint light washed out the gloom.

I found myself standing in a twilit, washed-out field scattered with grey daffodil-like flowers that swayed in an airless breeze.

By me, a glowing purple river ran like curdled blood, and on either side of it, translucent forms floated about, moaning, weeping.

They were—were... Souls!

*I was in the Underworld!*

## CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE



There were no words.

There had never been words to describe where I was. Or what I was feeling.

An overwhelming mixture of dread and despair, and a thousand other terrible emotions assailed me as I took in my surroundings. The place I'd been doing everything to avoid.

All the tales of the Underworld spoke of the River of Sorrow, where asphodel flowers grew in the Grey Fields, and souls roamed in desolation. And here they were, as real as anything I'd ever seen.

But this couldn't be right. I shouldn't be here.

I did everything everyone asked of me, always. I did everything the curse required of me. I got a fairy king to declare his love, and pledge himself to me. This was exactly how my brother's curse had been broken, exactly what the Spring Queen wanted.

So, why didn't it work? It had felt like it had been working. But now I was in the Land of the Dead.

*But I wasn't dead.*

I couldn't be...could I?

No. I was *not* accepting this fate.

And to do that, I had to conquer my shock, get out of this macabre field.

I moved at last, rushing away from the wandering souls until I crossed some kind of ethereal border, and entered a darker stretch of land.

The ground seemed carved from obsidian, stretching as far as I could see like an inverted night sky sprinkled with stars. But there was no sky here, only an encompassing dome of darkness and desolation.

A path embedded with raw gems eventually appeared before me, and giant, glowing crystal stalks lit my way. Their brightness was being sucked ahead, and soon I saw where it poured. Into another river, a bright, lulling green this time, with whispering poppies growing on its banks. This had to be the River of Memory.

It led somewhere deeper into this surreal realm, the flowers growing in number as I followed its stream, as if they were directing me into the unseen depths to my predestination. I thought I could make out the outline of a mountain in the distance, with a cavern in its side. But as I approached, it looked like some kind of edifice, mind-boggling in size...

"Fairuza?"

I stopped with a gasp, thinking the worst, that a psychopomp had come to collect me to my allotted afterlife.

But there was no black-winged man, or a hooded figure bearing a scythe awaiting me. There was only something, *someone* climbing out of the river. A girl.

No older than me, she had wavy, red hair that brushed the backs of her knees. Or it would have been red if her entire form weren't so faded, like a painting that had been left out in the sun for months.

Hazy as her features were, I would have recognized her anywhere.

This was Princess Ariane of Tritonia!

She'd been with me in Cahraman. From the day I'd arrived, to being one of the Final Five, to becoming Nariman's hostage in the palace for months, until we attended the joint weddings of my uncle and aunt, King Darius and Princess Loujaïne.

And here she was, in a worse condition than mine, up to her knees in that eerie river.

But what if this wasn't her? What if this was some sort of apparition?

Though, why would something appear to me as her? Being a princess, she'd been the only one I'd considered worthy to be pitted against me in that infernal contest. When we'd both lost, I'd thought she'd sail back to her island to marry some oligarch. I hadn't paid her any thought since. There was no reason anything should manifest as her to me, now of all times.

In trepidation, I floated away. "Ariane? Is it really you?"

She waded closer, encased in the faint glow of her white peplum gown, her ethereal green eyes having no pupils. Her mouth, a mere outline now, quirked in a sad smile. "What's left of me."

The horror of confirmation spread within me, rustling my nerves like wind through leaves. "You...you're dead."

"No need to rub it in." She jerked her chin in my direction. "Looks like you are now, too."

I furiously shook my head. "No. Not yet. I still have time."

"If you're not a shade, then what are you?"

Shade. That's what she was. Less than a ghost.

"What happened to you?" I whispered.

Ariane's monochrome eyes somehow managed to convey more heartbreak than I could have imagined. "I made a mistake, but I fixed it. I think. And now I'm here."

"What mistake?" When she only shook her head, I tried another question. "Ariane, how long have you been here? When did this happen?"

"That depends. I believe it's still summer now, isn't it?"

Summer? No, it was spring. But...

Faerie! Time moved differently in Faerie. And if it was already summer, then more time than I thought had passed. I didn't have any longer to waste, not before I ended up like her.

I reached for her, hoping that our similar states would make us tangible to each other, that I could pull her out of that river.

My fingers barely made contact with her arm, but I still urged, "Come with me, tell me where your body is."

"It isn't."

Before I could ask what this meant, howls shook all of existence around us.

Ariane ducked back into her river, looking up at me in desperation. "Fairuza, if you can leave, you need to go now!"

"What's happening?" I cried.



“He’s coming!” she hissed, shaking with terror. “He’s coming, and if he sees you, you won’t leave!”

I didn’t need to ask who *He* was. The howls grew in volume and number, an ominous chorus of hellhounds ushering in their master. The Horned God.

Paralysis had long sunk its claws into me before I saw the shadow of his antlers elongating along the ground. Just as soon as I did, I felt myself being yanked back through a tight, dark tunnel.

Within my next heartbeat, gone was the Underworld. In its place, a circular room flared around me, full of floating candles, with a group of hooded women sitting cross-legged on the floor surrounding me, chanting.

Where had I travelled to now?

One stood and threw off her hood, bearing a face I had never wanted to see ever again. A haggard face, with ash-pale skin, long blackened nails, red sunken eyes, and a vicious smile that brought to mind the silent snarl of a predator.

Marzeya, the Witch-Queen of Zhadugar, that autonomous magical city in the north of Cahraman. And the deranged woman who had thrown me to the ghouls in Mount Alborz.

“I see you’re having an interesting trip.” Marzeya moved her arm through my middle, a sensation that made me shudder. “I’ve been wondering how you’d have your out-of-body experience.”

This reminded me of what was arguably the most important thing about this witch: her access to knowledge seen only through the veils of time, past or future. She’d known Ada was an imposter, and had given her accurate predictions. She seemed to have known about my current condition in advance, too.

Maybe she could tell me what was going on, and how to reverse it. “You know what this is?”

She inclined her head. “Yes, the amendment to your curse left you stranded between life and death.”

“Can you tell me what I’m doing wrong about breaking it?”

“And why would I do that?”

“Last time I saw you, you gave two girls of my party predictions about their fates. The least you can do after subjecting me to those ghouls, is offer me the same courtesy.”

“Oh, yes. Ada didn’t heed all of my warnings, got herself into a spot of trouble, but it all turned out in her favor in the end.” Marzeya’s red eyes lit up, intrigue curling her dark lips. “As for that big blonde beast, she’s in for a world of excitement.”

She meant Cora. I waited for a clarification of what she meant by “excitement.” When she didn’t, I asked, “Is she?”

Marzeya coughed out a smokey, deranged laugh. “Exciting for me as a spectator, certainly.”

I thought of the strange, wandering dream I’d had as I’d first left my body, of the blonde girl in the farmland, and the being that emerged from beneath the earth to snatch her away from the moon. Did those visions have any weight to them?

I shivered. “What’s going to happen to her?”

“Aw, since when do you care for anyone but yourself?”

Once, that had been true. Beyond being involved with my own curse, I’d always felt I couldn’t spare worry beyond my immediate family, with my father being at war, and my brother devolving into a monster. But since my life had been derailed in Cahraman, I’d learned that empathy wasn’t finite, it could spread to anyone who needed it. Now, with Robin’s example, offering help wherever he went, at any cost to himself, the least I could do was care.

And then, despite how antagonistic our acquaintance had been, Cora had come to my rescue. Had

I been the same self-absorbed princess I once was, I would still owe her a debt of gratitude.

I glared at Marzeyya with the intensity of my newly-forged conviction. "I care."

Marzeyya only turned her gaze downwards, like she could see through the ground, and into someplace far below. "It is rarely a good thing to be worth the gods' attention, or their envy. So many pretty girls earn the ire of goddesses, just by existing, but that girl..." Marzeyya chuckled ominously. "She'll turn the heads of deities, and will pay dearly for it."

I felt my very being chill at her dire predictions.

As if that wasn't enough, Marzeyya's gaze flitted back to me. "As for you, there's not much to say as you're already hanging in the balance. But I will tell you this: You're barking up the wrong tree."

"Excuse me?"

Marzeyya hummed absently as she looked around the room where the rest of the witches and even the candle flames seemed to be frozen in time. "You heard me, dearie. You're purposefully seeking out fool's gold, as if any crown will be the right fit."

"I'm doing what the Spring Queen's curse wants of me, I'm seeking out the noblest of men, and now, a fairy one at that. Following her requirements worked for my brother! The only difference between us was that waiting for the right one to come to me was not an option."

Marzeyya laughed again, seeming delighted by my confusion and despair. "The right one didn't just happen upon your brother. It wasn't fate that led her to him."

"Yes, it was! That witch threw her and her father in Rosemead, threatening to offer them to the Beast she thought Leander truly was, and—"

"Nariman Rostam never intended to make good on her threats to our dear Ada. She just got rid of her stowaways in the first stop she could, and then used them as incentive to make Ada work hard for her." Marzeyya pointed through me, as if at something only she could see. "The only thing in common between your curse, and your brother's, isn't his solution, but the catalyst of his rescue."

"The catalyst was Bonnie!" I insisted. "The daughter of a fairy princess who said she loved him. That's it!"

Marzeyya gave a piercing cackle. "I'm sure she willingly sauntered to his castle when she heard of the man-eating monster, ready to declare her undying love and get the handsome prince at the end."

I threw my hands up in frustration. "You make no sense at all!"

"Dearie, it's not my fault you're thicker than a cinderblock."

Tension gripped my jaws. My body must be grinding its teeth to powder right now, thanks to the irritation this horrid woman inspired. "Give me a clear answer, I beg you."

"Now, where would be the fun in that?"

I groaned, curling my fists, making her laugh harder.

"It's not that hard, princess. All you have to do is ask the right question. What led that girl to your brother, and what made her different than any pretty girl your family could have sent his way?"

"I don't know what led her to him. But I suppose it was her determination that made her different."

"Determination for what?"

I searched my memory for the relevant bits Bonnie had told me, when I tried to glean what I could replicate from their experience. "To not fear Leander, then to go to whatever lengths it took to save him, and those caught in his curse, as well as her father and Ada, who she thought were in Faerie."

"Sound like someone you know?"

The search for a good comparison landed on only one man, and he was the only one without a title.

I only stared at her, frustration tearing me apart.

“Now, get out of here. You interrupted my summoning.” Marzeya waved her hand in my face.

Before I could blink, I was sucked back into the dark tunnel.

A heartbeat or an eternity later, I blinked back to somewhere drenched in brightness.

But though it was sunny, I was no longer in the Summer Court, but in an environment similar to my kingdom’s countryside.

I could see rolling hills covered in fields of wheat that shone like gold in the midday sun, while in the near distance, vegetable patches spread. All similarity to my kingdom ended when I saw the unearthly colors of the produce, the giant upright rabbits, and the carts being dragged by flying horses.

This was the Autumn Court!

Before I could wonder how I got here, I realized two more things: I couldn’t sense the weather like I had before, and I heard voices.

Bracing myself for another apparition, I turned around in their direction just as Amabel neighed sharply, and Robin spun around, gaping at me.

Then he blurted out, “How are you here?”

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX



With everyone staring at me in shock, I could only shake my head mutely. I had no idea how I'd come back. Or why I'd gone to the Underworld in the first place.

Agnë and Meira finally jumped off their steeds, and rushed towards me, eyes filling, speaking over each other.

"We thought it worked, and you returned to your body!"

"We thought King Theseus broke your curse!"

"We thought you'd wake up, and the thorns would be gone, and they'd come for you!"

"We should have gone straight from the Summer Court to check on you!"

I shook my head again, but this time I had an answer. "You would have found nothing changed, since I wasn't there."

"If you didn't return to Briarfell, then where did you go?" Robin asked, looking as distressed as I felt.

Trying not to think of my encounters in the Underworld or Zhadugar, I ignored his question, looked around. "Where are you heading?"

Will approached me awkwardly. "The Summer King told us my sister was alive, and with the Wild Hunt in the Spring Court. Alan offered to lead us there, through his realm."

I nodded, still dazed.

"Why didn't it work?" Meira looked and sounded at her wits' end. "He was a king! He said everything right!"

"Perhaps just like you miscalculated your amendment, you are misinterpreting the curse itself?" Robin suggested, never taking his eyes off me.

My fairy godmother made an affronted sound like a whistling tea kettle. "Misinterpreting—! There was never any doubt about the curse's terms! It is to be broken by the love of the noblest of men. Once Fairuza's betrothal to Prince Cyaxares was assured, we believed it would be him. Why do you think we wasted all these years, and we're in this situation now?"

Robin ignored her rant, took a step closer. "Fairuza, what happened?"

I couldn't escape his question this time. "I don't know. One second I thought it was working, the next I thought I was dead, then I was back here."

As if to comfort me, Amabel lowered her head towards me, but when I instinctively reached to pet her—I couldn't feel her at all.

Terror blared through me as I raised my shaking hand in front of my face. It was a barely-there

outline that was as see-through as glass. In my mother's culture, this would be the gesture to ward off danger and bad luck, or what they called the evil eye. Many hung hands with blue eyes on their walls, doors, and from their necks. But now nothing could stop the dark magic consuming me.

"I'm literally losing my grip on life." I giggled hysterically, locking eyes with Robin's pained ones. "Just like you said. The tether to my body is thinning the longer I stay away from it, and the longer it sleeps." My laughter choked into a wheezing whisper. "You want to know where I went? I was where true ghosts reside. I went to the Underworld. Probably a warning that my time is running out."

"This is all my fault." Meira stared at my disappearing hand in a daze. "I should have left it alone, shouldn't have interfered and made it worse."

Will grabbed her by the shoulders, snapping her out of her stupor. "If you hadn't tried, she would have long been dead, with no hope of bringing her back. We still have hope, because of you."

I knew he was right. But that hope was fading right along with pieces of my body, and I couldn't help the resentment and futility that rose through me like bile.

Robin watched me, unblinking, as if afraid I would disappear again, which I could any moment now. "We'll talk to that queen once we reach her realm. She's sure to remove her curse now you've done everything she demanded."

A bitter huff rattled through me like chimes in the wind. "Leander and Bonnie almost died trying to reach her, only for her to send them away. What makes you think it would be any different with me?"

"There *has* to be something we can do!" He sounded so wound up, as if the time limit was his. "Didn't Agnë say we have her king left?"

Agnë stumbled closer, words tripping over each other. "Yes. King Yulian. He was abandoned by his betrothed just like you, Fairuza. If there is anyone who will understand your situation, and be the one to break your curse, it's him. He is under a terrible spell as well, so you two could be each other's salvation!"

Robin forced a smile. "That's even better, since the Winter Court is closer. Once there, Agnë will introduce you to her king, and he'll break your curse!"

Unable to douse his attempted enthusiasm by saying I might not have enough time for that anyway, I only nodded.

After everyone got back on their horses, the others rode ahead, with Robin giving Maple to Agnë, leaving Amabel for me. He walked beside us, leading her by the reins, wordlessly helping me since I now had only one hand to steer her with. And for a long while, we continued the trek through Autumn in silence.

Like Arbore, trees were everywhere, but most were types I'd never seen. All they did was keep bringing back Marzeya's cruelly cryptic words. *You're barking up the wrong tree.*

We soon entered what Agnë said was called the Pumpkin Path, and if it was that spooky with the sun still on the horizon, I wasn't looking forward to trudging through it in the dead of night.

We were deep within it when Robin suddenly broke the silence. "What did you see?"

I drew in a shaky breath at the thought of Ariane, and how she'd seemed resigned to her terrible fate. "I saw someone I know in one of the Underworld rivers. Then I almost saw Him."

He didn't need to ask who I meant, his eyes widening as he looked up at me. "So he really exists?"

"What do you mean?"

"It's just I've heard the Horned God is nothing more than some pastoral deity that people

eventually confused for Death.”

“From the way I felt at his approach, it was definitely *Him*. And he almost caught me.” A tired huff escaped me. “But how did people imagine a pastoral deity as a half-man, half-beast skeleton? It would be the worst thing to get gardening advice from.”

He looked so relieved at my quip. “I figured the skeletal part was an exaggeration, and it just had horns like satyrs. But regardless of what Death looks like, he won’t catch you, not anytime soon.”

His forced optimism only intensified my hopelessness. I could no longer feel him in any way, my sense of smell was missing, along with my ability to perceive temperature and wind. These were all signs I was losing connection with my body. I didn’t know how long until I became a true ghost, or something much worse.

As if sensing my turmoil, concern gleamed in his brilliant eyes. I couldn’t stand the way he looked at me. The way they all did, with dread and pity. I needed to change the subject before I burst into tears.

“So, why the green theme?” I gestured at his clothes.

He grabbed the end of his cloak, fanning it out dramatically. “When you operate around woods and fields as green as our country’s, you must blend in, so no one sees you when you attack, and loses sight of you when you retreat.”

“Pure strategy, then. And here I thought you were no strategist, and that’s just your favorite color.”

“A color can hardly be called strategy, but it is my favorite. At least, it was.” His gaze locked with mine, and I stupidly hoped he’d say turquoise was his favorite color now. Instead, he asked, “What’s yours?”

Feeling ridiculously let down and embarrassed, I changed the topic again. “Where is Alan?”

“He said he had to run ahead to scope out the border between this court and the next. To avoid any unpleasant run-ins with ‘the residents.’”

Robin didn’t sound entirely convinced. And with the way Alan-or-Keenan had brushed off our encounter with the ghouls, I dreaded to glimpse what he considered unpleasant. Especially now the landscape bordering our path was fast shifting into a nighttime forest, and it was as chilling as I’d feared it would be.

“I believe he isn’t who he claims to be,” I said.

He only shrugged. “Is anyone here who they claimed to be? And then, fairies never reveal their true identities to humans unless they must. My mother didn’t tell my father who she really was until the day she left us. He only told me on his deathbed, and it was then the glamor she’d placed on me to make me appear fully human began to fade.”

It was the first time he’d mentioned her, the source of his pointed ears, superhuman agility, and mischievous streak. It hadn’t occurred to me that she wasn’t in his life anymore. Then again, fairies didn’t seem like the sort that valued the monotony of domestic life.

Any other time, I would have needled him for information, but I didn’t feel like discussing family, and how they wronged us. We weren’t chatting jovially as he spun me around a ballroom, we were crossing a treacherous terrain, somber and stressed, and expecting the worst yet to come.

I was still the one who broke the next stretch of silence. “I don’t understand why it failed. Why everything I attempt fails. I always do whatever is expected of me, and it’s never enough—not for my instructors or courtiers, my family or supposed betrothed, or even this curse.” My lower lip trembled, the only warmth I felt coming from my burning eyes. “What more could I do?”

Robin shot a hand up, looking as if he was aching to touch my arm, before he dropped it with a defeated exhalation. “I think that’s your problem. You need to stop doing what others think is best, and

do what's best for you."

"I don't even know what that is! I spent my entire life being bombarded by demands, orders, and instructions from those who ought to know best. And yet, it turns out they might have been wrong about everything, from my education, to my behavior, to my priorities, to what breaks this curse!"

"We don't know about that last part! We still have Agnë's king, and he sounds perfect for you!"

Agnë *had* framed her king as the perfect candidate. But I had become really wary of anyone who could be described as such. The last one had sent me on an exploratory trip to the Underworld. This one might be what made my visit permanent.

I exhaled. "I'm starting to think the Spring Queen *let* Leander be saved. Maybe she couldn't take my father's heir from him. A future king is not expendable, after all. But I am."

"Don't ever say that! You're *not* expendable!"

I looked down into his stormy eyes, and felt even worse at his affront on my behalf. "Robin, even if I wasn't cursed, I'd be worth less than a welder or a farmer to my family and kingdom right now. At least, they need those. I serve no purpose if I don't marry a king."

"You need a king to *live*, not to appease your parents! They already got you into this mess, and have no right to judge you. Their opinion of your worth, or that of anyone who doesn't benefit you, doesn't matter."

"It's easy for you to say that. You're free of expectations as an outlaw..."

"I wasn't born an outlaw! You think it was easy for me to throw my old life away and become—this?"

Wishing I could reach down and soothe him, smooth his tousled hair, I sighed. "Is that what you'll do after this is over? Hang up your bow, and go back to your old life?"

He seemed stunned by that question, like he hadn't considered it before. "I can't go back to being who I was before."

"Which was?"

He gave me a bitter smirk. "The Earl of Sherwood's son."

## CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN



By now, I should have been used to surprises. Especially where Robin was concerned. He was like a rose, where I'd peel one layer and find another and another, each revealing some new facet to him.

"You're noble-born?" My whisper was as ghostly as I was becoming.

He exhaled. "*I was*. Your dear Uncle Jon stripped my father of his lands and title when he opposed his actions. Which begs the question, is one still noble without a title and a place in the hierarchy?"

This explained his hatred of my uncle. It had been personal as I'd first suspected, augmented by a healthy dose of righteous chivalry.

"What happened to your father?"

"After being disgraced by the regent himself, all my father's friends and relatives abandoned him," he muttered, his voice seething with remembered anger and pain. "His heart couldn't take it, and he died just as I was being sent off to war."

"I'm..." I didn't know what to say to him. An apology, coming from the niece of the man who'd ruined his life might be insensitive, and the last thing he'd want to hear.

Empty words of regret meant nothing, anyway. I had to do something about this.

"If I survive, I will help you make this right!" I said urgently. "If I don't, you said you know Leander well. He hates our uncle, too, and would want to rectify his crimes against the people. He would surely offer to reinstate your land and wealth!"

He waved. "He suggested it, but I didn't have time to think about how I can govern my father's estates, or restore his honor, in my current state. Anyway, everything had to wait until I brought Marian back."

And once he did, would he give up this life for one with her?

He looked ahead with unseeing eyes. "So to answer your question, I don't know what I'd do afterwards. I have been at this for so long, fighting all manner of enemies, on behalf of others, trying to do what I can to right any wrongs I come across. I don't think that's something I can just stop doing."

"Why not?"

"Because, while leaving my old life was hard, I no longer remember how I lived it. I only have experience with the war and the corruption it spawned, but now it's over and things are going back to how they used to be, *I'm* not who I used to be..." He trailed off, looking pained. "I think that's why I



didn't take Leander up on his offer immediately, not only because my ears are pointed now, or just out of duty to Marian, but because I don't know what to do. I've been Robin Hood for so long, I don't know how to be anything else."

"Do you *want* to stop being Robin Hood?"

"Do you *want* to stop being a princess?"

Even though he'd suggested it before, now he'd made it a question, it hit me like the uprooting gusts of a windstorm.

My whole life, my identity was intertwined with my status as the firstborn princess of Arbore in centuries. But for a while now, even without the curse, I could see nothing positive about that title. Everything about growing up in the supposed safety and luxury of a castle, being afforded the best in food and clothes and education, all for the purpose of impressing Cyrus and the people at his court, it all felt so—pointless.

I was supposed to secure alliances and birth heirs. I wasn't expected to fend for myself, or have a job, let alone to rule, or even get involved in true diplomacy. I was supposed to replicate my mother's life, as my mother herself insisted, despite her perpetual displeasure with everything in that life.

But why would I take her advice when she was so bitter and hollow? When had she or any advisors, tutors, or courtiers ever steered me in a fruitful direction? Why had everything I learned served a useless purpose, just to keep up appearances, and impress people who wouldn't blink if I died?

All I could feel now was regret at the waste. At being hindered by imposed limitations, at having my enthusiasm smothered, and my view of anything that didn't serve my predetermined goal blocked.

If I had been born a few steps down the hierarchy as Robin once said, the daughter of a duke or an earl like him, I might have been afforded the freedom to be someone. To be myself.

I could have pursued music as a career, sung on stages across countries, published my own poetry, and penned my own compositions. I could have gotten to see the evolving world, and bring the art form Robin had mentioned to a grander audience. I could have also been involved at court, and with the people. Plenty of ladies helmed charities, and had helped during the wartime, while I'd been cooped up in my gilded cage, endlessly practicing to impress the man who wanted nothing to do with me.

And just like that, his question no longer unsettled me. For now I knew its answer. Unequivocally.

"Yes," I gritted. "I would stop being a princess if I possibly could."

He quirked an eyebrow at my intensity. "Even if it upset your parents?"

"Like you said, I owe them no further appeasement. They can go boil their heads."

He cracked up, his laugh a free, joyous sound. "That's the spirit! You need to stop doing what others want from you."

"Take your own advice, hobgoblin," I tossed back at him. "You're no better than I am, compromising your life to appease strangers."

"That is not comparable! Appeasing your parents made you live an ornamental life of no use to anyone, starting with yourself. *I* help people."

"You are one man, robbing hoodlum. You can't singlehandedly fix everyone's problems. That's what legislation and law enforcement are for. Your piecemeal solutions are simply inefficient."

He made a dismissive noise. "I would argue it's more efficient when I'm free to act without jumping through the hoops of lawmen, who..." He stopped, then sighed. "But you're right. It would be more efficient to be within the system, than to continue punching rural criminals and robbing corrupt nobles. It's where I would be able to fix it."

I couldn't help being in awe of how dedicated he was to his cause. My admiration was all the more intense after seeing him cast as a chaotic opportunist for so long.

"All the more reason to get your father's title back," I said, "so you can hold a position of power more easily."

"I was only speaking hypothetically. I don't foresee holding any kind of position with these." He touched the tip of one ear, and I remembered I'd thought just that a while ago. "Maybe I should get another glamor while I'm here."

My heart twisted at the thought. "It isn't right. That you'd hide who you are so you wouldn't be persecuted, so you could do what you want to do—what you are the best at!"

"It would be unavoidable, if I decide it's what I'll do after this. But if I do it, I warn you, I'll exploit all the connections I can get." A hint of his earlier mischief returned as he grinned up at me. "I'll use them as a shield if I'm ever exposed, and certainly when I step on gluttonous toes within the system. What happened to my father isn't going to happen to me."

"If I return to Arbore in one piece, I'll support all your endeavors to take down corrupt councilors and bumbling ministers."

"Would you really help me usurp those in charge, Your Highness?"

I shrugged. "I'm living—excuse me, *half*-living proof that long-established ideals and systems don't work as they once did, and that relying on those who are out of touch can cause more harm than any good they maintain. In short, my father needs new blood in his government."

Robin petted Amabel's head in lieu of my hand, his grin holding both pride and embarrassment. "I never thought you'd grasp or at least care about such issues, but here you are, proving me wrong."

"Does that bother you?"

"Quite the opposite! I've had such a grey view of the world for so long, I kept hoping someone could come and paint over it for me. Any color would have done, really. But with your opinions, and the hope they give me, you're painting it every bright color I've forgotten exists."

If it were possible, my face would have turned as red as Will's cloak. But I was sure it still betrayed my reaction to his praise, so I pretended to check our surroundings.

Night seemed to get darker the deeper we traveled down the Pumpkin Path. Its cloak surrounded us along with the thickening mist obscuring any indication where the Path would end. Would Alan—or rather Keenan...

The sound of galloping echoed around us, followed by a scream.

The man I'd just been thinking of burst into view, riding his huge reindeer in a mad gallop out of a billowing cloud, holding a lantern that bathed him in its violently swinging green glow.

It had been his bellow that had ruptured my line of thought.

*"Turn back!"*

Sinister laughter boomed from behind him, followed by the crack of a whip. It wrapped around his neck, snatching him off his mount, and sending the lantern crashing to the earth, setting the grass aflame.

Fear spiked within me as the men drew their weapons, and my godmothers raised sparking hands. Next second, a figure emerged from the rising fire and smoke.

Stomping over Keenan's body on a skeletal horse, and clutching a crackling whip made of human vertebrae, the body of a man came into full, horrifying view. A body without a head.

It was the headless horseman!

## CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT



I stared at the nightmarish figure before us, a mixture of paralysis and morbid fascination gripping me.

The space above its shoulders offered a peek into the path behind it, and its sourceless laughter seemed to shake the woods. But it was its sinister emanations that drenched my ethereal form in a horror akin to the one I'd felt in the Underworld.

With a roar, Jon charged it with his spear. Keenan sprang up, slamming him back and away from the green flames that ate at the grass.

"I said *run!*"

The horseman cracked the whip, and its tail-end snapped around Keenan's neck again, stopping him dead in his tracks. Strangled noises flowed from his gasping mouth as he struggled for air.

An arrow flew past Keenan and pierced the horseman's shoulder, eliciting a shout that echoed from an unfathomable direction through the trees, and a demonic neigh from its red-eyed, skeletal horse.

Keenan clawed at the whip and tugged, unbalancing the horseman enough to loosen its grip on his throat. The moment he ducked out of the way, Will tossed a knife at the horseman with a frustrated growl.

The horseman caught the knife as if it was standing still, and flung it back. If Meira hadn't pushed Will out of the way, and stopped its trajectory with her glowing magic, it would have lodged in his head.

Not heeding Keenan's orders, Jon charged it with his spear again. It stopped him dead, gripping the spearhead, its palm oozing congealed blood without a sign of pain.

Beside me, Robin readied another arrow in his crossbow, but Keenan threw himself at him. "Stop shooting at it. And get *her* out of here."

"It's just one monster, we can handle it," Will argued.

"The dullahan is a harbinger of death," Keenan rumbled, stormy eyes urgent. "If it spots Fairuza, she's done for."

This was why it struck such dread within me. "But if we turn back, I'll miss my last chance to break my curse. I'm already starting to disappear."

"We *need* to keep going," Robin agreed, agitated. "We must get it out of the way."

"That's what I've been trying to do. But it stopped being interested in me when it sensed your party riding down the Path." Keenan jabbed his thumb behind him. "It wants to get to Fairuza so

badly, it didn't even go after its head when I dropped it in the Open Eyes."

Robin blinked. "The what?"

"The part of the Pumpkin Path where the eyes in the poplar trunks open," Agnë said. "They usually watch travelers, but also mess with them at times. I've seen them once when I accompanied my brother to Queen Rowena's manor, while he courted her daughter."

Keenan jumped back on his reindeer, and steered Agnë's horse off the Path. "If they didn't mess with you before, I elect you to find the dullahan's head with me, before it kills one or all of you. If it feels its head is in danger, it will have to come after it."

A loud snap blasted through the woods ahead, and Jon hit the ground with a shout of agony, his broken spear embedded in his shoulder.

Agnë screamed for him, but Keenan dragged her horse away, circumventing the dullahan, shouting back at us, "Keep it occupied until we find its head! And don't let it touch Fairuza!"

Will and Robin rushed to defend their fallen friend, but it wasn't interested in him anymore, and knives or even magic arrows did nothing to deter it from advancing. On me.

Robin launched himself at it, trying to unseat it from its horse, yelling desperately at me, "Turn back!"

"I can't! I'll die anyway!"

"Then follow the others around it! We can't hold it back for long!"

I didn't want to leave them. This thing had already tossed the strongest of us aside like a broken doll. It might do far worse to Will, to Robin...

But until Keenan managed to lure it away, there was nothing I could do but distract them. I'd only make Robin take deadly risks to protect me.

Urging Amabel off the Path, we galloped aimlessly through the woods.

I kept trying to listen for the others through the racket her hooves made over the dead leaves covering the ground, furiously praying that Keenan and Agnë had found the creature's head.

Just when I thought I heard their voices, the demonic neigh of the dullahan's horse ripped through the cold air.

It was coming after me.

But if it was, what had it done to my friends?

I tried to turn around, but Amabel only ran faster, crossing a silvery stream as she hurtled in the direction of Keenan's and Agnë's voices.

The whip cracked behind me, but I didn't dare look back. Amabel whinnied desperately as she leaped over a fallen log—but she didn't land.

Time seemed to slow down, keeping us in a mid-air arc as black eyes covering the pale poplar trunks all around us opened.

Colors reversed, the trees becoming black as they started to shiver and moan, and the eyes turned pale yellow with black, slit pupils. They watched us unblinkingly as we sailed through the air, the captives of some dark magic, and the dullahan closed in on us. I screamed and even my voice distorted to a deep, horrifying parody.

This land was the stuff of nightmares!

Just as I could almost feel the dullahan's whip tear through my dissipating form, the eyes blinked *en masse*, and we were released from the stasis, landing hard on the ground.

Not wasting a second, we exploded ahead, and in the distance, I saw Keenan's silhouette lifting a severed head by the hair. He'd found the dullahan's head!

My relief was short-lived as it cracked its whip again, hitting Amabel this time. An agonized

whinny tore from her as she leaped, landing near Keenan, before turning to face the dullahan.

Keenan jumped between us, swinging the head over his own. "You dropped this?"

Forgetting me for now, the dullahan charged after Keenan, only for him to catapult its head away. It urged its horse to leap, but an arrow beat it to its own head, piercing it in one closed eye mid-flight, sending it hurtling back.

Screeches tore the very air around us as it turned to lash out at Robin.

No!

With a shrill cry, I urged Amabel forward, and she exploded into a flying leap, her full momentum behind her horn as she jammed it through the horseman's chest.

She snapped her head up, tearing the body off the demonic horse and into the air, with her horn impaling it, jutting out of its back.

The shrieks around us rose to a bone-shearing crescendo, making the trees shake like they were in a hurricane.

As Amabel tossed her head down, dislodging her horn, the skeletal horse collapsed into a heap of bones. But as the dullahan fell limply to the ground, it made one last dying grasp for me.

I heard Robin's booming shout as I felt myself being pulled out from the world, the last sound in my ears his voice frantically calling my name.

The eyes of the trees watched me as I fell into the darkness.

## CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE



I didn't know how long I plummeted. But all the way, as I fell into nothingness, all I could think of was Robin.

At some point, the darkness parted, like clouds over the moon. This time there were no rivers or fields. I was in a dim hallway with dark, hewn, gem-studded walls, each faceted stone winking like a star in the subdued illumination.

I was starting to breathe in relief, thinking I wasn't back in the Underworld, when I saw the Horned God. And he wasn't alone. A three-headed woman was looming over him.

Then he pivoted and walked away from her. In my direction.

Looking around desperately, I phased into a column, exited behind it as the Horned God approached, thankfully with the woman trailing him and commanding his attention as all her heads continued talking urgently. His proximity still had a slew of disturbing sensations crashing into me like a breaker, leaving me cold and shaking.

Once they passed, against my better judgment, I followed them, hoping to find a way out of here. The stories about the living venturing into the Underworld always said there was a way in, and a way out.

Maybe I could also find the river where I'd found Ariane. I might be able to do something for her, even if she'd said she couldn't come with me. I might be here to stay myself this time, but I had to try.

Now I trailed the nightmarish creatures, grateful that I didn't have any footfalls, my insides turning inside out at their closeness. Besides the sheer power and menace emanating from them, their appearance shared the—wrongness of the headless horseman. A human form with one truly disturbing deviation. No head, three heads, or a dead animal's head.

Then I was close enough to hear what they were saying.

"But can't you go up to investigate?" the three mouths of the woman spoke at once, creating an eerie chorus.

"Certainly," the Horned God rumbled, his voice like distant thunder, making my knees knock together with terror. "I'll pop to the surface and question the first unsuspecting human about his whereabouts."

"Could any of his...natural children have banded together to confront him?" said the left head, before the others alternated with a question each as she followed him around a corner. "Could they have done something to him? Is it even possible?"

The Horned God didn't answer as they crossed into a cavern of gigantic proportions. An

incandescent blue river ran through its middle, with the ghosts of people in ancient clothes wandering along. Some had more modern attire, resembling Campanian farmers. I followed them until they exited into an open space that had a sky above. How was there a sky in the Underworld?

I soon forgot this inexplicable occurrence as they led me into an orchard teeming with silvery trees that stood like a uniformed army, heavy with ruby-red fruit that reminded me of pomegranates.

The Horned God snatched a large one off a branch, snapped it in half with such effortlessness, I wondered if he harvested souls by snapping necks and ending lives himself. He bared the garnet-like seeds that shimmered within, and its juice flowed out like blood over his pale hand.

One of his hounds approached him, gleaming eyes as red, and he offered it the fruit. The hound's jaws gaped, and it wolfed it down in one bite.

When the Horned God spoke again, his voice in this open space was like a raging sea, almost making me drop to my knees. "Something that had never happened before is happening in the living world, and in the divine realm. His disappearance is just a symptom of a much more insidious and widespread disease that could bring both toppling down."

"But surely the other gods must know something?" the three-headed woman said, sounding more agitated. "And is the death rate of potential heroes another symptom?"

The Horned God gave a derisive snort that I felt could scrape flesh from bone. "Heroes? So having divine blood automatically makes someone worthy of adulation and song? I think not."

"The same can be said for the sons of kings," the left head said. "Their blue blood automatically puts them above the rest. It's no wonder many royal lineages claim descent from one god or another, to add divine right to their entitlements."

"Throughout history, how many pivotal figures were the spoiled spawn of kings?" He tilted his macabre head at all of hers, dancing his fingertips over the handle of his silver bident. "Being born with a title doesn't mean anything. It's what you do with the one you achieve."

"And you would know all about that," the middle head said with a mirthless huff. "Has anyone caught on to you yet?"

"That depends on what our eavesdropper has to say."

And he looked directly at me.

I couldn't scream. I couldn't even think with the Horned God pinning me with his eyeless stare.

He moved towards me, purple light shining within the endless depths of his sockets, a pale, elegant hand reaching out. I stumbled back, shaking, and mumbling nonsensical prayers and pleas, begging him to spare me.

It wasn't my time to die. It wasn't. I had to leave. Had to return to Robin—had to see him, tell him...

A heaving gasp tore out of me as the Horned God almost touched me,—then I was sucked out of the Underworld again.

## CHAPTER THIRTY



Next breath, I found myself back within proximity of my friends. We were, once again, in a vastly different place.

The floor seemed to be made of crystal, as did the walls and the staircase near the hall we stood in, with a lot of broken mirrors all around.

I'd seen this place before, in those first out-of-body visions.

Robin stood by an ajar double door with Will, Meira, and a tall, blond man with pointed ears and a beard. Meira was crying as if her world was ending. Will held her close, trying to comfort her.

"What happened?" I croaked, voice wavering with the reverberating shock of my hair-raising encounter and narrow escape.

Meira swung around with a hiccup, let out a cry of anguish as she rushed towards me, arms held out. She stopped before she went through me, swayed unsteadily, and I saw she'd been crying for a while now. She cried harder now.

"What happened?" I asked again. "Where is Agnë? How is Jon?"

"Jon is being treated by the court healer, and Agnë's with him." Robin approached, cautiously, like he would a deer who would scamper off at the first movement. "Did you go to the—same place again? You really scared me—all of us."

It warmed my frozen heart, how worried he sounded. But he looked more than worried. He looked horrified. I raised my hand to him, and found it totally gone, along with my entire arm.

A desperate moan escaped me. I was deteriorating too rapidly.

"Did you find the Winter King?" I asked dully when I could speak again.

"The king is visiting a nearby city," said the bearded fairy, Agnë's brother by the looks of him. "He is due to return soon."

Meira let out a howl of a wounded animal. "We were too late. He's engaged! And his curse was broken by the girl he's marrying. We were just a few days too late! The days we wasted in the Summer Court!"

I just stared at her, too worn out to even care that I'd lost my last chance of being saved. I'd somehow known it would be like this.

I felt the intensity of Robin's concern singeing me, and raised my eyes to his. I lost myself in the planes of his face, calming myself by counting his freckles. I could trace constellations on them if I could just reach out and touch him.

"I'm so sorry," he whispered hoarsely. "I really thought this would be it, that you would be free."



Strangely unmoved by the dire reality I was mired in, I smiled at him and Meira placatingly. My arm was missing and oblivion was staring me in the face. Soon my whole body would join my arm and I would cease to exist. I would return to the Underworld, for good this time. But I didn't want them to feel bad about it. They'd done enough, suffered enough, on my behalf.

Agnë emerged from the room beyond, and rushed to my side, blue eyes swollen and reddened, lips quivering with her sobs. "I really thought King Yulian would be the one for you. I'm so sorry—so sorry we failed you."

"What about Keenan?" asked Agnë's brother of no one in particular, before he turned to me. "I am Lord Simeon, Your Highness, the son-in-law of the Queen of Autumn. She has a son who is unmarried."

So that was how Keenan was half-fairy, and had a human father. Now I remembered that two human brothers had married two royal fairies, one couple having Bonnie. The other had Keenan.

I shook my head at Lord Simeon. "I've met Keenan. He is unavailable."

That surprised Simeon into a baffled splutter. "When did that happen?"

"You met him?" Robin exclaimed. "You mean...?"

I nodded. "Alan is Keenan, evidently the Prince of Autumn."

The others took a moment to digest the revelation.

Then Will suddenly shouted, "There has to be something else we can do! We didn't come all this way for nothing!"

"You brought us all this way for your sister," Meira said, looking like the fire inside her had been put out.

"And for Fairuza," added Robin indignantly, before turning to Simeon. "You're the expert here, Lord Simeon, and you know how grave our situation is, seeing as your king was cursed as well. There has to be some other option."

Agnë clung to her brother's arm, pleading, "Please, Simeon, I am her fairy godmother, I can't fail her. Think of something!"

Simeon seemed to wrack his mind, before he faced me again with a heavy sigh. "The last person in this land who could be the one you're looking for, isn't easy to find, not to mention, dangerous. He is—"

A powerful whoosh interrupted him, and dragged our attention to the nearest balcony doors. They opened to reveal a sleigh dragged by reindeer. It was a testament to my numbness that I didn't blink at the fact that they were flying.

A green-skinned, fiery-haired girl disembarked first, hopping down into the balcony, followed by a very tall fairy man with long, silver-blond hair.

They were the couple from my vision.

As I wondered if what I'd seen pertained to their past or future, they entered the room. Both Agnë and Meira dropped into deep curtsies.

The Winter King and his bride-to-be greeted us with confused expressions, before he waved for my godmothers to rise.

King Yulian nodded at us in general salute, before he looked at Agnë. "Agnessa, good to see you again. Where have you been all this time?"

Agnë, Simeon, and Meira launched into explanations.

After a while, the king raised his hand to silence them, frowning at me. "So you are a wraith?"

"I don't know what I am at the moment," I said miserably.

"I've been there, very recently," said his green-skinned betrothed. She was scrutinizing me, like

she recognized me from somewhere. "Are you Fairuza, by any chance?"

Just when I thought I couldn't be surprised anymore.

I stared at her, wondering if she was another of Bonnie's fairy relatives, Keenan's sister perhaps? Or was that one already married to Simeon?

I nodded. "Yes. How do you know me?"

"I met your brother. I was friends with Bonnie. I'm Ornella, but call me Ella." Her smile was nice enough, but I sensed some bitterness in its tightness. "How are they?"

"They're fine, at last. And engaged."

"Doesn't anyone else find this a little weird?" asked Will. "How everyone seems to be related somehow? Or know each other through some degree of separation?"

"As far as I know, the only thing linking us together is the Spring Queen." Ella turned to me. "Has that miserable hag appeared to you yet?"

"Ella, there's no need to badmouth her," Yulian chided.

"I'll say whatever's on my mind, considering how long I couldn't do so, because she didn't do anything about it!"

"Did she curse you, too?" Robin asked her.

Ella rolled her eyes. "No, but she left me to toil and be tortured for years, and appeared to offer her help *only* if I was of use to her."

"That doesn't change the fact that we wouldn't have met if it weren't for her," Yulian said.

Ella pulled a face. "I think Keenan played a bigger role in our introduction."

So she was the girl Keenan had talked about? The one who'd been saved from her stepfamily?

It stood to reason, for she was safe now, but didn't seem fine yet.

Yulian shook his head at her fondly, then addressed us again. "So I understand Princess Fairuza needs a king or a prince to break her curse?"

"But I have run out of kings and princes," I said, numbness deepening.

Ella cocked her head at me. "Have you? The Spring Queen said something about wanting to see your curse undone, but she doesn't get involved unless she can get something out of the situation. So it sounds like you have to do something to please her." She nudged Yulian. "Doesn't she have a nephew?"

"That's what I was about to tell them when you arrived," said Simeon. "Her nephew and heir leads the Wild Hunt."

"He *what*?" Will shouted. "He's the one who has my sister!"

"Well, it looks like you have more than one reason to continue into Spring's domain," said Yulian. "Maybe your quest was all about finding the Wild Hunt, where Mr. Scarlett will find his sister, and Princess Fairuza will find her prince."

That actually made convoluted sense.

The Spring Queen hadn't come to my birth celebration intending to curse us, but to give my father one last chance to re-negotiate their broken marriage deal in return for peace. Her new deal had been for me and Leander to marry fairies. It had been only when my mother had threatened her, and my father had done nothing about it, that she'd cast her curses.

But it seemed those curses had been forcing us into doing exactly what she'd wanted all along. Leander was marrying a girl with royal fairy blood. While in my case, it made a fairy kind of sense that, through all my failures and ordeals, she'd been steering me to a specific fairy royal. Her heir. The only one she'd predictably consider the noblest of men.

So why wasn't I relieved about the possibility? Was I just tired of being let down? Because it was

better to not have hope than to have it dashed? Or because I wanted the one specific half-fairy I could never have?

I looked down at my missing arm, and knew I had no choice. I had to pursue this final yet most logical lead, relief or even acceptance not required.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE



“This is perfect, Fairuza! We will find your savior at last.” Robin sounded relieved enough for both of us, before urgency gripped him again as he turned to King Yulian. “We need the Wild Hunt’s exact location, Your Majesty. All the King of Summer told us was that the Wild Hunt are now in Spring, and that Marian was alive and well.”

Yulian scratched his chin thoughtfully. “An exact location is something I’d have to investigate.”

“We don’t have time for that!” Robin exclaimed.

The king gave him a commiserating nod. This was a man who’d had a timed curse hanging over his head before. “Then Keenan is your best bet. He should know where they are, or be able to find them in time.”

Ella shook her bright head. “Keenan is unavailable at the moment. I sort of sent him on an errand.”

Yulian frowned. “The princess from that Folkshore kingdom that resembles our court?”

Ella nodded, and both of their shoulders slumped in regret.

So Keenan’s princess was human. Just like Bonnie’s prince. Our world was becoming intertwined with Faerie more every day, it seemed. Something I would have been appalled at only months ago. Now, if I had a choice, I knew which fairy I’d meld my life with. But I had no choice.

King Yulian addressed Robin, as our leader it seemed. “The only relevant information I have is that the Wild Hunt make use of our Crystal Caves around now. Those act as a discreet shortcut between our court, Spring’s, and the Folkshore.”

“Caves?” Will yelped. “We’ve had enough of those, and whatever dwells in them, to last a lifetime.”

Yulian shrugged. “Nothing lurks in the Crystal Caves—that I know of. We can take you there if you’d like.”

Robin turned to me, gaze urgent. “What do you say?”

It was strange having him defer to me this way. Like he valued my opinion, despite being the least experienced in this group, and since this had been about saving Marian, long before it was about me.

But we were bound in this quest one way or another, and regardless of what happened to the rest of me, I wanted to spend whatever time I had left with him.

I shot him my best attempt at a smile. “I say, what else have we got to lose? Besides, I’m curious what a crystal cave looks like.”

Robin cracked a wonderful grin that soothed my nerves and made me almost forget my disappearing body parts.

“We’ll take you to the Crystal Caves then,” Simeon said. “You’ll hopefully find the answers to all you seek on the other side.”

Agnë wrung her hand, pleading gaze on me. “The healer said Jon’s injury would have killed a weaker being. He’s not ready to move yet.”

“But time is of the essence,” King Yulian warned. “The Wild Hunt maraud the Folkshore at this time of year, so if you don’t hurry, you might miss them.”

“Leave me,” Jon yelled from the room beyond. “Just go get Marian and Fairuza’s prince.”

Simeon set his hand on his sister’s shoulder. “Do you have to accompany them? If you stay, you could finally meet Sorchia, and watch over your friend’s healing.” Before she could say anything, he added, reproachfully, “I haven’t seen you in so long—and you missed my wedding.”

Agnë’s eyes filled with terrible conflict. She cared for my fate more than I could have imagined. But this was her home, and she’d been away from it for so long, because of me. And she cared for Jon, who did need someone to stay with him at his weakest, and in an unfamiliar place.

I would have loved to hug her. I could only attempt a smile. “You stay here and take care of Jon. You must miss this place. I’ll be fine.”

Agnë sobbed and rushed to wrap her arms around the space I occupied in the approximation of a hug. “I don’t want to leave you. I want to be there when it all goes right.”

I didn’t have it in me to tell her I couldn’t see anything going right. Even if I survived. She was the most optimistic person I’d ever met, and people like that, childlike in their trust of the world, took disappointments harder than those of us who expected them.

“Meira should be the one stuck with me in every part of this trip. This is all her fault, after all.” My fake levity clearly didn’t work, evidenced by Meira’s strangulated gasp. I gave her an apologetic grimace, before turning to the king. “Now, where exactly are those Crystal Caves?”

Yulian led us out at once, taking us through his castle of crystal—or was it ice? The beauty of all the reflective surfaces, and the kaleidoscope of colors that refracted off every facet was hypnotic.

From the outside, the castle was a cloud-scraping, crystalline structure, with turnip-shaped domes, and soaring spires that gleamed in the moonlight. It was such a feat of architecture and magic, it even managed to take my mind off my despair.

Robin seemed as taken with the place. “And I’d thought the Summer Palace was the most wondrous place I’d ever see. Now comes this castle made entirely of crystal. Or is it ice?” Just what I’d been wondering. He sighed. “I heard so many stories about this place, but none could describe its reality. No wonder many in Arbore believe Faerie is where we go when we die, that this land is our Underworld.”

“But now I know better.”

I regretted my bitter quip the moment it was out. Robin seemed stricken, and we followed King Yulian to a carriage in charged silence.

After he directed the driver to take us to our destination, and we were pulling away, Ella yelled after us, “When you finally meet the Spring Queen, bite her head off! Literally, if you can!”

I couldn’t help a huff of mirth. Yet another rival, who’d deprived me of a chance at survival, that I would have liked to know better.

Out of the carriage’s rear window, I could see our horses galloping after us. I felt bad for dragging Amabel through this treacherous quest, but hopefully once in Spring, she’d have vast green fields to joyously run through.

We soon passed through the city of Midnight, the Winter Court’s capital, and alongside a green river that painfully reminded me of the one in the Underworld.

Attempting to distract myself, and because I was truly curious, I asked Robin, “The stories you heard about Faerie, were they from your mother?”

Robin massaged his neck, as if it hurt, a frown settling between his spectacular eyebrows. “Some of them. I thought she was making things up to entertain me. Turns out she was describing the places she missed. Then at some point she got tired of missing, and decided to go back.”

“Do you know where she went?”

He shook his head. “She just left. I always wondered if she ever missed my father and me the same way she missed this place. Or if this was something she did frequently in her long life. Settle down with a human for a few years, start a family, and then leave when it got boring.”

“Could be. I guess it doesn’t matter what you are, or where you’re from. You could still end up dissatisfied with your life.” I watched the ship on the green river sail sluggishly alongside us, wondering about the lives of the fairies aboard. “I always took that as a given, from my parents’ example, and all the people at court. None of them are happy, or even content. So, neither happiness nor contentment was ever a requirement in my future. It was all about surviving, and performing my role.”

“You deserve better than that,” he said solemnly. “You deserve happiness and laughter and excitement and fulfillment.”

I gulped down a searing lump of tears. “So do you.”

We fell silent for a while afterwards.

Will and Meira had long dozed off, her head on his shoulder, and his cheek pressed against the window, breath casting vapor on the glass. Robin remained awake, keeping me company. Soon we started talking again, about anything that came to mind, including my latest theories about the Spring Queen’s intentions, like we weren’t on a mission with our very lives at stake.

Like there was no one else in the world but us.

Though I was running out of time, it still felt it was all too soon that we reached our destination, at the base of the snowcapped mountain range that stretched as far as the eye could see.

We disembarked below an opening that emitted a soft, bluish glow, about a hundred feet up the side of the mountain.

“Once you enter, keep going right to reach the Spring Court,” the driver said.

Thanking him, we mounted our steeds, and made our way up.

Focusing on the trotting staccato of Amabel’s hooves, and hoping nothing ravenous would emerge to attack us, I followed Robin into the Crystal Caves.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO



We kept going right through what felt like another realm. It probably was. The complex tapestry of giant crystal stalks covering the walls and ceiling seemed totally removed from everything I'd seen in Faerie.

I remained at the back of our quartet, my eyes practically stroking the luminescent surfaces and structures. At one point, I started dragging my remaining hand through the glowing polygonal tips, and it elicited a crystalline hum, an energy that resonated within me. It calmed me, focused my thoughts.

It was why when the tunnel diverged and my companions kept going right, I floated off Amabel's back and took the path to the left.

I heard them calling my name, but I kept going. The path widened farther in, with the walls emitting a purple gradient.

I took another turn where the hum got louder, and found myself in a cavern with a soaring ceiling, where crystal stalactites hung like chandeliers that streaked inside with blue light, like they were all encasing lightning.

I kept going until I reached a wall that looked like a chiseled mirror. I stopped to gaze at my reflection. It had faded a little more. And here I was, wasting time, instead of rushing to my salvation.

Robin's reflection appeared in the crystalline surface through mine, real, vivid, and so, so—beloved.

Then he was so close I could almost feel his warm breath on my neck, when I felt nothing anymore.

“Why did you wander off like that?”

I couldn't tell him I no longer wanted to leave this place. No longer believed salvation mattered when it would plunge me into a life I could no longer bear. A life without him.

Instead, I locked eyes with him in the reflection, and tried to smile. “It's not every day I see something like this.”

“I lost track of the others following you.” Amazingly, he wasn't angry, only agitated, for me. “We must find them and get out of here, fast.”

I floated after him as he strode back where he came from. “We'll probably be able to follow the noise of their inevitable argument.”

That surprised an amused huff from him. “I guess you're right. Just don't wander off again. You gave me another terrible scare.”

“Why? It's not like anything can happen to me.”

“Something can. I thought that you would disappear again, for good this time. I don’t know what I’d do if you did.”

“You’d be free of another burden.”

“Burden!”

“You didn’t mean to take me on when you began this quest.”

“I don’t care how anything began! You know I don’t think of you that way, right?”

I looked sideways at him as he slowed down, found him bathed in the purple light, giving him an ethereal glow, and making his freckles stand out further. I sighed. “Then how *do* you think of me?”

His eyes darted away, before returning to fix mine in such intense sincerity. “I’d like to think that we are good friends by now. Don’t you?”

As selfish and pointless as it was, I’d wanted to hear something more than that, now more than ever.

Shrugging to hide my foolish, crushing disappointment, I said, “Perhaps, but I wouldn’t know. I’ve never had any friends. No one ever seemed to like me.”

His jaw tightened. “You might be a bit hard to get to know, but anyone who missed out on the chance to get to know you is a fool.”

Everything that was left of me fluttered at his earnest praise. It was my turn to escape his gaze. “Many did attempt to ingratiate themselves to me, but it was never genuine. They didn’t want my company, but the benefits it could provide.”

“Then those you met at court were terrible opportunists. The disparity in your status shouldn’t have mattered. Your brother and I had no problem becoming true friends, neither did he and Lord Gestum.”

“How come I don’t remember you being Leander’s friend?”

Robin rolled his eyes. “Your mother heard that my mother practiced magic, and barred my family from court. But when it was time for Leander to be fostered by a knight, he was sent to my father. Leander believes your father left on some expedition to avoid her demands to get him back.”

Disbelief was like a bucket of ice water down my back. “So if my mother wasn’t so prejudiced, we could have met years ago?”

He nodded. “But I doubt you would have given me the time of day.”

I doubted that. I knew I would have ended up feeling the same about him anyway, even knowing it was impossible still.

Out loud, I said, “Don’t be so sure, you are quite interesting. We could’ve had a few good talks about music.”

He grinned, the blue light from a cluster of crystals making his white teeth glow. “We never did have a proper talk about that. Agnë said she gave you the gift of Song, but gifts are nothing if not practiced and perfected. From the little I heard, you sing like a songbird. Were you also instructed in playing any instruments?”

“I’ll have you know I play the piano quite beautifully, as well as the harp. How about you?”

Robin swept his bow around, and pretended to glide it over an invisible violin. “Ten years of string instruments. But my favorite was the violin. Very expressive for such a small instrument.”

I tried imagining him, younger and struggling to hold a violin under his chin. “I see you traded one bow for another. I wonder which came first, the archer’s bow, or the violinist’s?”

He snapped his bow back with a smirk. “Obviously, the first bow was the one you put in a child’s hair to keep it out of their face.”

I was reminded of the silly jokes he made during our first meeting, when he’d made me laugh out



loud.

I found myself grinning at the memory. "I'm being serious here."

He stared up in exaggerated pondering. "Then I submit the weapon came first. Music is a sign of prosperous civilizations, whereas hunting and warfare existed long before we built any."

"I'd like to think music has always existed."

Robin spoke towards the ceiling, raising his voice, "Song is probably as old as speech, with the first ever instrument being our voices."

I mirrored his action, our voices ringing clearer in this area. "Perhaps song is what began speech."

"Or we began with whistling." He whistled a sweet, songbird tune, like he once had what felt like a lifetime ago, before we'd arrived in Faerie.

Aching nostalgia filled me as I did the same, whistling the tune of a ballad that had been on my mind, like some morbid background music to my tragic trials. It was never one I enjoyed. But now it felt painfully relevant to my situation, with the heroine flung into a similar fate to my own.

Recognizing it at once, he joined me. The wordless duet we created was so poignant, I stopped before I choked up.

I gestured with my remaining hand, needing a distraction. "The acoustics here are excellent, better than my favorite music room."

"I can't believe your music teacher had you singing *Sweet William and Marguerite*. Seems like a forbidden topic to teach a princess."

"It's not any different from most ballads that end terribly."

"Oh, I was talking about the version that *didn't* end terribly."

By coincidence, I understood what he was referring to. Once, the fancy of writing my own music had become so strong, I'd studied compositions in library songbooks. I'd found another version of the ballad where instead of both dying at the end, they lived happily ever after.

Or maybe, from his perspective, my version wasn't a sad ending. You never know, as one person's tragedy was another's comedy.

"Let me see if we're talking about the same version."

And I started singing:

*"Marguerite in her tower was kept  
For many a moon by her mother queen  
In her prison she seldom slept  
For her love's return she's always been  
Waiting since war tore their love asunder  
But Sweet William returned to wed another"*

Robin continued for me, each note clear and reverberating:

*"That night her spirit rose to visit him  
To ask why romance her on a whim  
And promise to return to her side  
Then take another girl for a bride  
Next spring morn Sweet William rose"*

*Rushing to the one his heart chose  
'Where is Marguerite' he asked her kin  
Without a word, up the tower they led  
Him where she laid still upon her bed  
'I know not why I forgot,' he cried  
Kissing lips with no breath within  
And breathing his last by her side."*

I then joined in. The crystals glowed brighter, as if drawing energy from our harmony, their humming rising like an orchestral accompaniment.

*"They were interred among the trees  
Where they once danced with the bees  
Marguerite lay with Sweet William in repose  
Then upon her grave grew a red, red rose  
And from his sprung a dark, dark briar  
In death their love grew like vines  
Till it could grow no higher  
Forever bound and intertwined  
Red rose among dark briar."*

Then we fell silent.

His beautiful tenor remained in my ears, a voice I could never tire of hearing. A voice that had become an essential part of me.

Eyes gleaming emerald even in the blue light, Robin stared at me, panting. I hadn't seen him pant like that during severe physical exertion.

As if coming out of a trance, he said slowly, "I take it back. You don't sound like a songbird. You sound like nothing I've ever heard. It's a shame so few people, and the wrong ones, too, got to hear such beauty."

It didn't matter if I was incorporeal, I was certainly flushing like I had a fever as I blurted out, "I could say the same about you. You should have been the bard, not Alan or Keenan, or whatever his name is."

After a stretch where we walked in silence, he said, "Want to hear the commoner's version with the happy ending?"

"I've read the lyrics once. But is it the same tune?"

"Yes, though on a bright, major key, not that lamenting, minor one."

Robin took in a deep breath, and started singing:

*"Sweet William lived among the trees,  
Wild and learned of tongues and blades  
Marguerite, a beauty beloved by bees,  
A princess who fled to the everglades.  
In verdant fields their song and dance  
Made flowers bloom and droughts flow*

*Born was a love that made stars glow,  
Then torn apart by fate's own hands."*

They were the lyrics I'd seen. I didn't know them well enough to sing them fluently. But there was no one to judge me if I stumbled on a few words, or became pitchy with uncertainty. Robin wouldn't.

I joined him, earning a delighted laugh mid-song as we embarked on a full duet that made my numb heart flutter with glee.

*"War came to the land, setting fields ablaze  
As Sweet William left to fight on the seas  
Marguerite was left behind to count the days  
'Til his return to wed by spring's first breeze  
But Marguerite's queen mother decreed  
For her to wed the king of wasps,  
Defiant, she declared she'd rather bleed  
Rid her mother of her pawn by asps."*

I launched into a different harmony in the last stanza, and his smile broadened as he stopped and bowed to me, offering me his hand.

I hovered my remaining palm above his and followed his movements into a dance.

*"In her tower, Marguerite wept to the bees  
In their pity they built her a waxen stair  
Of honeycomb for her to flee to the trees  
Where she heard a voice beyond compare."*

I felt my spectral skirt flutter around me, and my bare feet regaining some sensation of the cold ground. Robin kept miming the twirling movement, and I spun out of the tunnel in that joyous waltz.

How I'd dreamed of a moment like this. When I would meet my prince, and we would forge a connection during our dance. When I would look into his eyes, and know he wasn't just the one to save me, but the one for me. The one who made me feel like I wasn't dying, but brimming with life. A life I'd spend with him.

I'd had that moment during the ball. And now again.

But he wasn't my prince. He wasn't the one for me.

No. I wouldn't spoil this moment with such desolate thoughts. This could be my last chance to be with him.

I forged into a new harmony to end our duet.

*"Sweet William returned with a ring  
And bees made them their queen and king  
From their love roses with no thorns did thrive  
In the woods forever after they shared their lives"*

With a final spin, we came to a stop, with him laughing, and I giggling with a freedom I'd only ever found with him.

When we quietened, he said, "I still can't credit how you know this version."

Because no princess would be taught a song where one escaped marrying a king to live with a wild man in the woods.

"It was through personal research."

"Aha. Now that makes sense." He started striding again before giving me a sideways glance. "Though it's actually less credible than the tragic version, since princesses don't marry wild men."

No, they didn't. But I'd also been raised to believe princes didn't marry common girls, and they were doing just that left and right around me.

Everything in my life had turned out to be either an outright lie, or a catastrophic mismanagement, leaving me with the one choice of having no choice at all.

So here I was, making the one choice I could make, taking a detour that could literally cost me my life.

It had certainly cost me my heart, all over again.

Any remaining mirth faded, just like my body.

After a while, I said, "I always felt this version spoke of flower fairies, anyway. Those tiny pixies you'd see in children's books."

"Where did you get that idea?"

"Sweet William and Marguerite are flowers—carnations and daisies. And she was 'beloved by bees,' as flowers tend to be. I wonder why these characters were such a popular topic for songs and poetry."

"My guess is because Sweet William is literally called 'the poet's carnation' in Armorican."

"Don't tell me you speak Armorican!"

"My grandmother insisted I learn it," he said, expression fondly resigned. "She believed we'd be invaded by Northlanders, and I ought to impress our new overlords with my mastery of their language. After years of linguistic torture, we went to war with the Avongartans instead, who happen to speak a hideous language."

I couldn't hold back a giggle. Though his grandmother's idea was a practical fear, since it nearly came true. "How do you say Sweet William in Armorican?"

"*L'æillet de poète*," he said with a nasal affectation, like when I'd mockingly mimicked my tutors. "More literally, *Doux Guillaume*."

"Doesn't *æillet* mean eyelet? Like the holes in honeycomb?"

"Could also be the eye of a needle. But the honeycomb does suit all the bees in the ballad."

"Why do words have so many meanings? In my curse, 'sleep' turned out to mean anything but. At least my brother's curse was plain and easy. Just get a pretty girl to love him."

"I'm glad it did work out that way, otherwise I would have orchestrated their meeting for nothing."

My thoughts came to a complete halt. "What?"

He laughed wearily. "I was stationed in Rosemead towards the end of the war, and I needed my friend to be himself again. It also didn't hurt that the sooner the heir was human again, the sooner he could boot your uncle out of the regency. I needed to find him the right girl, and Bonnie practically fell in my lap." He chuckled again at the memory. "I tricked her into thinking I kidnapped her father to 'sacrifice him to the Beast.' I needed her to *choose* to go up to Leander, and hopefully trade her life for her father's, so they'd be stuck together until they fell in love. And wouldn't you know it? It all

went completely to plan!”

My mouth eased open, but only stammering came out. “You...you...”

Robin winked. “...should be the best man at their wedding, yes. Especially since I also came to their rescue on that fairy path when the redcaps almost made a meal of them.”

His words mingled with Marzeya’s, flowing through my reeling mind like wind through a forest, whispering echoes.

*The only thing in common between your curse and your brother’s isn’t his solution, but the catalyst for his rescue.*

Robin had been that catalyst. The one true common element between Leander’s fate and my own.

He’d helped them in a way that had saved them both, in more than one way. Just as he’d helped countless people when he’d fought against the Avongartans’ efforts to invade us, and the corruption Arbore had spawned from within. He’d thrown himself into Faerie to save Will’s sister, refusing to count her lost, as anyone carried off by fairies always was. He’d promised to see me to my release, risking everything to fulfill his promise.

And he’d *seen* me. The only one who could truly see *me*.

Like those names in the ballad, words had many meanings according to context. Using my status as a frame of reference, everyone had misinterpreted my curse, as Robin himself had suggested. No one once doubted noblest referenced rank. And everyone had been wrong.

I had been barking up the wrong tree, all my life.

And since I met him, as Reynard, I had so desperately wanted it to be him. Now I knew for sure. And not just from what I felt in my heart.

Robin Hood, the selfless thief, the scourge of the unjust.

*He* was the noblest of men.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE



Years of navigating life at court hadn't prepared me for such a moment. If anything, they robbed me of the capability of being ecstatic for even a moment. I hadn't been taught to sink into the bad news, or savor the good ones, but to immediately think: "What do I do with this information?"

And that was the problem. What was I supposed to do, now that I realized he was The One? How could I broach the subject to him? How would I even phrase it?

Robin suddenly stopped, going pale. "You're not going to disappear again, are you?"

I shook my head, feeling lightheaded. "I think I know how to stop that from ever happening again."

"Yes, once we find the Spring Queen's nephew..."

"That's not what I mean." I bridged the step between us, hesitant yet excited, jubilant. "I think I know why nothing ever worked. The answer to my problem was something no one ever thought of."

His eyes widened, and his mouth opened...

"ROB!" Will's voice echoed from somewhere ahead, shattering the delicate, precious moment.

Not taking his eyes off me, Robin yelled, "Stay put, we're coming!" Then he urged, "You were saying?"

But I'd already lost my nerve.

When I didn't say anything, looking confused and concerned, Robin headed in the direction of the others' voices. "I wonder if they were too caught up in their belligerent courting to notice our absence till now."

The last thing I wanted to think about was my fairy godmother and his best friend, but it was something I could talk about. "Considering the frequency of human-man-fairy-woman couplings I've heard of, I wouldn't put it past Meira to club him over the head, and drag him back to the Summer Court."

Robin cracked a surprised laugh, before sobering up at once. "Maybe we'll end up having two weddings in Faerie, hers and Will's, and yours and the Spring Prince's."

"I won't marry him!"

My vehemence surprised the both of us.

Robin looked bewildered. "What choice do you have?"

"I do have a choice, especially if what I'm thinking is true."

"What are you thinking?"

"That the requirement of my curse isn't literal, but figurative."

Marzeya's words had said as much. *You're purposefully seeking out fool's gold.* And I had been, all my life. I'd known where the true gold lay for a while now. He had the real, innate value—not noblest by birth, but by character, by choice.

Robin's eyes only rounded, as if the idea scared him. "We don't have time to find more men who could figuratively suit that curse. You're already missing an arm. Besides, anyone else but him makes no sense."

"Why not?"

"You already established this was the Spring Queen's roundabout way of strong-arming your parents into accepting her deal. And don't worry, that nephew of hers will take you with my arrows pointed at the back of his head, no games or tests this time."

It was a wonder how I hadn't known it was him long before now. Everything he did, everything he was, made him my only true option.

I opened my mouth again to say that, but closed it again as another realization hit me.

If we'd always misinterpreted the definition of noblest, we probably also did that of love.

I'd always been led to believe that a commitment and a declaration equated to love, at least in terms of breaking the curse. But what if the curse didn't care about the words or the formalities, just like it didn't care about status and titles?

What if it meant I had to have the noblest of men's actual love?

The Summer King's failure to break the curse proved this theory. The curse might have even retaliated at what it had considered my attempts to fool it by giving me tastes of eternal punishment.

But if this was true, this made telling Robin even more difficult.

He would do anything to break my curse. But it would be obligation. Duty. Chivalry. Maybe even affection. None of those were based in love, but the very thing that made him The One. His very nobleness.

So did those two issues conflate? If he declared his love for me out of his promise and need to help me, would it work? Or would the curse consider it born of nobility, not specific love for me?

There was one thing to do. Tell him, and he would try, and if what he felt for me was enough, I'd be free. If not, I'd be out of time, and nothing would matter anyway.

But—if it worked, what of our lives after the curse broke? Wouldn't I be taking advantage of his nobility by tying him to me for life? At the expense of his own happiness, his own choices? After all we'd said about no longer living our lives for other people?

The curse's conundrum felt like a serpent biting its tail, a noose choking sanity and life out of me.

The only solution would be if he loved me.

But he didn't. Not like I needed him to love me. Like I loved him.

And if he didn't, how could I tell him?

There had to be a way to go about this, so he would save me, while ensuring his freedom to pursue his own destiny and desires in the future.

I had to think of something by the time we exited from this cave.

"They're over there." Robin pointed to the right, thankfully oblivious to my inner turmoil. "They sure love butting their heads together."

We turned a corner to find Will and Meira bickering and pointing in opposite directions.

"Where did you two go?" Meira beat Will to a tirade, looking worn out. "The moment we left the path to look for you, we kept going in and out of passages that led nowhere."

Robin smirked. "At least we haven't stumbled on any crystal ghouls."

Meira glanced around warily. "So far."

Will glared at her. “You should know if there could be any. How did you live here this long, and not see this place before?”

Meira humphed. “King Yulian himself didn’t know if there’s anything here. What I do know is we need to get out of here fast before Fairuza loses another limb!”

Will prodded her onward. “Lead the way, then.”

Meira dug her heels in. “You mean in case something lives here, so it can attack me first?”

“Why do you always assume the worst of me?” Will griped. “You’re the only fairy here, you ought to know more than we do.”

“Well, I don’t!”

“If I were born here I’d have explored this land, even the whole continent several times over!”

“That’s because you have nothing better to do,” she snapped. “I have a job!”

“A job you’re so good at, you did this to Fairuza!”

“Can you not bring me into whatever this is?” I passed through Will and Meira bringing their debate to a sputtering end. “I’ll go first.”

Robin stayed close, putting some distance between him and our bickering companions. “How do they have the energy for all this?”

“Some people find great entertainment in arguing,” I said. “My mother thrives on conflict.”

“Your mother needs a hobby.”

“If you say that to her, she’ll act like one of your arrows pierced her heart.”

“I’m starting to see why the Spring Queen lost her temper.”

It was meant as a joke. But it stirred my resentment of everyone involved in my curse all over again. I wanted it broken, now. Wanted to get out of here with everything in me, so I could tell Robin everything, come what may.

Like a path had called to me when I’d wanted to run and hide, now I wanted out, I found myself being drawn to a certain passage.

Soon, I could see light at its end, not the cool tones of the crystals, but the warm gold of daylight. As we approached it, the temperature rose, and the sounds of pastoral life came from beyond.

We had reached the Spring Court!

I rushed towards the light, feeling I’d suffocate if I didn’t get out of here, if I didn’t tell him.

But as soon as I stepped out of the cave, I fell face-first. I heard Robin’s startled shout, felt his fingers go through my elbow, his effort to save me as pointless as ever. I sank into the earth.

Somehow, I pulled myself out of its layers, and hovered over its surface, trembling. I lifted my ghostly skirt to check my numb foot—and found nothing.



## CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR



Robin knelt by me, staring in horror at my right leg where it stopped above the knee. “The last time I saw something like this, there was a lot more blood and screaming involved,” he choked, the sight of my missing leg seeming to disturb him even more than when my arm had vanished. “Somehow, this is even worse.”

The panic that had risen within me like a wave, crashed and dissipated at his distress. “I guess this trip *is* costing me an arm and a leg.”

Robin’s whole face crumpled as he groaned at my attempt to make light of it.

Will turned green like the bark of the pink-leaved trees in the distance. “The medic called it—a trans-formal amputation?”

“Trans-femoral,” Robin said, his expression one of drowning helplessness. “Can you stand?”

I tried to will myself upright, and couldn’t.

Robin exploded to his feet and ran away, yelling over his back, “I’ll bring Amabel.”

“I forgot all about the horses!” Will cried out.

Ashen-faced, Meira pointed ahead, her gaze fixed on me.

Our horses seemed to have long found their way out, were grazing in the distance. If we’d paid them any attention, we could have followed them out, saving ourselves the time that was eating away at me. The time I’d purposely wasted in my reluctance to find the Spring Prince.

Robin ran back with Amabel galloping beside him, and she kneeled so I could drag myself onto her back.

Before I could get my frazzled thoughts together, the others mounted their horses, and we began our foray into the Spring Court.

None of us spoke, thankfully, since I couldn’t hear any more about how I reminded them of the soldiers the war had maimed. I was nothing like those brave men who’d defended our land. I was the useless girl who was disappearing under a petty curse, while unable to find the right words to break it.

Meira finally broke the silence. “Since this is the time the Wild Hunt use the caves to go to the Folkshore, if we keep on this path, we ought to bump into them. I just hope we don’t go too far east, as I’d really like to avoid being spotted anywhere near the capital.”

“Why not?” Will asked her.

Meira’s lips worked nervously. “King Theseus would have executed me for staying behind to help Fairuza without his approval. The Spring Queen would probably turn me into a frog or a butterfly,

while keeping my mind intact, to punish me for altering her curse and interfering with her will.”

Yet she was braving such a terrible fate and wading deeper into said queen’s territory, all to help me.

Weighed down by guilt for ever blaming her for any of this, I fell behind as she and Will galloped ahead. Robin hung back, keeping me company.

And I couldn’t take it anymore. Just having him so close was killing me faster than this curse.

I had to tell him.

As if reading my mind, Robin said, “You were going to tell me something in the cave, but you stopped. Don’t stop now. You can tell me anything, Fairuza.”

He was right. I’d told him everything I’d never dared tell anyone else, including myself.

Then as I met his fervent gaze, a new hope blossomed within me. He cared, deeply. Maybe more than I thought?

What if what he felt for me was enough? If it was, and he broke the curse, I would make sure he was free to do whatever he wished afterwards...

“ROBIN!” Will’s bellow splintered out our charged moment. He was galloping down the hill towards us, shouting maniacally, “I found them! I found the Wild Hunt!”

Then he swung his horse around, and thundered up the hill once more.

Robin’s face split into a bright grin of relief. “Looks like all our worries are almost over!”

Any thought of blurting out the thoughts roiling in my mind vanished as he turned away, towing Amabel in a speedy gallop up the hill.

As we rode up to the others, I saw Meira put a hand over her mouth, sharing Will’s stunned expression.

“What do you see?” Robin called as we approached.

As soon as we were beside them, Will pointed downhill at a group of riders heading towards a lake. All but one had fantastical characteristics, such as blue or green hair, massive yellow eyes, bird wings, or horns.

The odd one out was a smaller, slither figure in hunting gear, wearing a red hooded cloak with a quiver of arrows slung across her back.

“She...she...” Robin trailed off into speechless shock.

Will found his own voice as he tore down towards the Wild Hunt, shouting, “MARIAN!”

The rider in the red hood stopped, whipping her head in our direction. That was all it took for Robin to regain his senses and follow Will, yelling her name, too.

“What’s going on? Why are they upset?” I asked Meira.

“We came here to rescue a kidnapped girl,” Meira said quietly. “And hopefully strong-arm her captor into marrying you. But she doesn’t look like his captive. She looks like his companion.”

“But this makes no sense.”

“We’re about to find out what it means.”

Meira led the way down as we galloped behind our friends. Marian and the blue-haired fairy man rode to meet us halfway.

When we came within feet of them, Robin dismounted mid-gallop and Marian did the same, running to each other.

They reunited in a hug, and I felt my heartstrings snap.

## CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE



This was it.

This was the real reason I hadn't wanted to leave that cave.

Because I hadn't wanted to see this moment, and live its agony. This was why I hadn't been able to tell him he was the one for me. After all my rationalizations, with all my longings, all my desperation, I couldn't find the right words to ask him to save me. Because I couldn't bear to rob him of his chance to follow his heart. Because, all along, I'd felt he'd been someone else's. Someone who'd been lost to him.

But he'd found her. The girl he'd spent a year looking for, whom he'd known for years, and Leander had told me he'd been promised to. The girl who, by the looks of things, had more in common with him than I ever could.

And more than anything, he could hold her.

When I couldn't bear witnessing their reunion anymore, Will mercifully came between them.

He pounced on Marian, gripping her by the shoulders, shaking her, spitting with fury. "What is going on? What are you doing here?"

Marian broke free, throwing off her hood, unveiling a mass of glorious brown curls that framed a heart-shaped face with large, almond-shaped dark eyes. "What are *you* doing here?"

"Looking for you! We thought that this—thing had kidnapped you!" Will stabbed a finger at the blue-haired fairy.

The huge, handsome man gave a small bow of his head. "This *thing* is Prince Guidion, leader of the Wild Hunt, Heir of Spring. You must be Willoughby."

"Nice to see you know of me," Will spat. "Now I want to know why you took my sister."

Prince Guidion shrugged elegantly. "Because she asked me to."

"Asked you...?" Will became shrill in his anger. "*Why?*"

Before Guidion could answer, Robin touched his shoulder and pointed at me, whispering things I couldn't make out. Nodding, Guidion walked away with him.

Will tried to storm after them, but Marian dragged him back. "You deserted your post because you thought I was carried off by the Wild Hunt? What do you think I am, Willoughby Scarlett? A lamb?"

"You disappeared when the Wild Hunt was riding through our part of the Folkshore! What else was I supposed to think?"

Marian rolled her eyes at him. "Next time I'll leave a note."

"*Next time...*!" Will went as red as their cloaks as he launched himself at her.

Robin came back in time to hold him back, but he looked almost as angry with her. “We thought they could be torturing you, or worse. So yes, a note would have been a good idea!”

Marian started looking bewildered. “I thought you both were at the frontline. I didn’t think of leaving word, because I would have been back in a couple of weeks, anyway.”

“A couple of weeks?” Robin gaped at her. “Marian, you’ve been gone for over a year.”

“A year?” Realization dawned on her blanching face, followed by guilt as she winced at her brother. “Time. Faerie. I forgot...”

“*You forgot?*” Will practically shrieked.

Marian retreated, holding her hands up. “I was in a hurry when I spotted Guidion and his people riding through our part of Arbore.”

I was too caught up in their reunion, and the fallout I was crumbling under, I didn’t notice Prince Guidion coming to stand by me.

“Your friend says my aunt is responsible for your condition,” Guidion said, sounding amused. “I didn’t know she made half-formed ghosts these days.”

I didn’t know if he was trying to be funny, or if he was being his irritating fairy self. I couldn’t care less. Robin was talking to Marian with everything I had deluded myself into thinking was reserved for me. Open ease and familiarity, pleasure at seeing her mixed with genuine worry. But he could hold *her* hands in his.

Meira started singing my praises to Guidion, listing what Leander and court advisors had fed all my failed suitors, mostly what the six other fairies had gifted me with at the celebration of my birth. Basically, traits I had no hand in, and were, as Robin had said, ornamental. I doubted anything about me could interest a fairy prince. And I wasn’t interested in him.

I had eyes only for the two figures in matching hooded cloaks and hunting gear. I was deaf to all other voices beyond their argument.

Marian’s voice was rising. “I couldn’t wait until the Wild Hunt returned the next year.”

“Why?” Will exclaimed. “What’s so important about these fairies you couldn’t wait for our return?”

“This!” Marian tugged down her cloak and collar, baring three angry-looking claw marks stretching from beneath her ear to her shoulder.

“What is this?” Will hissed. “Would you stop being vague and tell us already?”

Marian rolled beseeching eyes to the skies. “Use your head, Will! That night I left was a full moon, and what was I patrolling for? Predators. Well, one got me before I could get it. But instead of killing me, it infected me.”

“No,” Will gasped, looking sick. “*No.*”

“That’s why I came with the Wild Hunt,” Marian said with a determined set to her jaw. “They said if I rode with them on an important hunt, they’d help me find the werewolf that scratched me. Once they do, and before the infection sets in, and it’s too late for me, I’m going to track it down, and I’m going to kill it.”

Werewolf? Like that horrific Lycaon.

“We’ll come with you,” Robin said firmly, his tone final. “We’ll help you, just as we would have from the start had we been there.”

And that was the final nail in my coffin.

I couldn’t ask him to help me now. Because he would. He would tear himself apart trying to save us both. And he would never live for himself.

That was my fate, but it shouldn’t be his. I wouldn’t let it be.

He was the one for me, but I wasn't the one for him.

Now he'd do what he'd come here to do, save Marian—and marry her. Because he loved her. He would have a free, fulfilling life with her.

But for him to do that, I had to remove myself from the equation.

“Are you listening to me?” Prince Guidion snapped irritably.

Staring down at him, like he was as see-through as I was becoming, I rasped, “Listening never did anything but waste my time, my whole life.”

As he opened his mouth to answer, I urged Amabel to gallop away, feeling the devouring numbness starting to consume my remaining limbs.

Meira galloped after me. “Where are you going? Fairuza! Fairuza, stop! This is your last chance!”

But her voice sounded so far away, like I had waded into a tunnel, leaving her at its threshold. The edges of my vision followed suit, dimming, becoming unfocused as I felt the tug in my center.

My other arm vanished, breaking my hold on Amabel, sending me flying off her back and out of Faerie.

It happened almost instantaneously, yet felt like a torturous descent. Then the Underworld emerged all around, with its eerie, green river coursing beside me, and dark, glittering ground and walls encompassing me.

The Horned God was there to receive me this time, the incandescent whiteness of his skull, and the silver of his bident the only stark brightness against our gloomy surroundings.

He waved, and I was whole again.

Tears flooded my eyes, sizzling like acid as I shook and sobbed, stuck in place, watching him approach.

My breath hitched, my heart hurt, everything burned.

But I knew what would happen. What I should do and say, to leave this existence with some dignity.

I forced my shaking legs to straighten, my quivering chin to rise as I faced him and said, “I'm ready to die now.”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX



Death stared down at me with endlessly dark, hollow sockets. His nearness became more nauseatingly terrifying with each passing second. I somehow held my ground.

I still jumped and moaned when he spoke, his deep, calm voice permeating everything inside and around me in a wave of terror and despair. “No, you aren’t.”

I shuddered so hard I felt I might break apart. “Wh—what do you mean?”

“Giving in to your fate is not the same as accepting it. That requires peace. You aren’t happy to leave the upper world, and you’d do anything to return. But you didn’t.”

“I had no choice. There was no use fighting your pull anymore.”

“You did have a choice. You had a chance. *The* chance. But you chose to let it slip, chose to die.” He started closing the distance between us, footsteps a slow, ominous, staccato echoing in the cavernous hall. “Why?”

It would be pointless to run. There was nowhere I could go now.

But he got too close, and the sensations emanating from him, of sinister magic, of death and darkness, weakened my resolve, snapping the last thread of nerve I had left.

I wept harder, ceasing the fight to appear dignified. My heart hardened in my chest, as if leaking its blood out of my eyes, desiccating into a dusty husk, filled with my last memory of Robin. Of him holding Marian, pledging his help to her, forgetting I was ever there.

But Death was waiting for an explanation.

So I gave it to him. “Robin spent so long being pulled off his path, living to help others, fighting for everyone’s well-being and happiness but his own. He’d been deprived of his birthright, and now may never get it back, never do what he wants, what he should, because of the other part of his legacy. But he finally found Marian, and she needs him. They can now go on one last trip together, where he would save her, then they can spend their lives together. If I had told him the truth of my need, he would have dropped everything to help me. He would have forgotten about his own needs. He would have thrown away his very life. And I couldn’t do that to him. I love him enough I’d rather die than see him unhappy.”

He cocked his head in a curious tilt. “Noble of you to put his happiness over your survival. But I’m afraid your selfless sacrifice was in vain.”

The tears stopped abruptly, as did my slow plummet into infinite misery. “What? Why?”

He pointed to the glowing green river, and steam rose in thick, swirling clouds. In their midst, a

portal formed. Within it, images began to take shape.

It was Amabel, galloping among familiar greenery. A hooded figure rode on her back, his green cloak billowing behind him as they tore down a yellow path bordered by massive blue mushrooms.

Robin was riding back to Arbore!

“What is he *doing*?” I cried out.

“Your boy thinks there’s still time to save you.”

“He’s not my...” I choked up, not daring to blink as I watched the landscape shift around Robin from the in-between of the fairy path, into the field where we’d embarked on our trip.

The next images showed him approaching the castle in Briarfell. The field of thorns had impossibly worsened since I’d last seen it.

Spellbound by the sight of him riding back to me, I stepped into the river, needing to be closer to the portal, ignoring the burn of the frothing water. “How did he know that he could save me?”

“Does it matter?” I felt Death’s heart-bursting approach, and heard the metallic thunk of his staff hitting the riverbank. “He’s too late, anyway.”

Too late. These had to be the cruelest words ever spoken.

The sliver of hope Robin had uncovered within me slipped from my grasp, and I waded deeper, not caring if it meant I wouldn’t get out again. I needed to tell him not to risk going through this lethal barricade again, to go back to Marian, to give up on me.

But the portal kept receding, keeping his image out of reach. All I could do was watch as he dismounted from Amabel, then maneuvered through the black briar expanse that was engulfing my body’s resting place. He weaved through the labyrinth of glinting thorns, pain hissing from his lips as they stabbed at him. I cried out at each injury, feeling their agony in my own flesh.

The darkness of the Horned God bore down on me, but I no longer cared. I was rooted by my worry for Robin as he emerged on the other side of the lethal barricade, his enchanted cloak intact but stained with blood.

Not giving himself time to catch his breath, he leapt to climb up the castle wall. The images faded, and before I could cry out, they came back as he rolled himself through the broken window of my tower, and ran to my body.

He tore off his gloves, shoved the canopy aside, and dropped by my body, panting, “I’m here. Fairuza, I’m here. Tell me you are too, please.”

“I’m not there!” I choked through the thorns filling my throat.

He only propped up my body, gently resting my back against his chest, stroking my dark hair off my face as he rasped, “I told you that you could tell me anything. Why didn’t you just tell me? But it doesn’t matter. I’m here now, so come back. You have to come back to me, Fairuza. You have to.”

I couldn’t say anything. Could no longer breathe.

I could only stare at him, learning a new level of helplessness as silence permeated the tower, the only sounds his harsh breathing, the only motion his hand stroking my cheek. My body’s chest was death still.

If I were emotionally detached from this scene, I’d call it poetic, poignant even. A moment to frame in plays or paintings, the tragic hero and his lost love.

But we were never together to be torn apart. We weren’t Sweet William and Princess Marguerite. Those two, regardless of how their story ended, had gotten time to be together. To be in love. What we’d never been, and would never be. It was all too late.

“Don’t tell me I’m too late,” he finally choked, as if answering me. “I just found you, and it felt like you should have been with me all along. We have so much time to make up for. I never got to tell

you about my adventures, or hear your music.” He pressed his forehead against mine, cupping my jaw in his calloused hand as the tears escaping his closed eyes flowed down his downturned face and onto my own. “Please, come back. I don’t care if you remain a ghost, or even a part of one, and I’m the only one who sees you, and you haunt me for the rest of my days. I just want you back!”

“Please go!” I found my voice at last, unable to withstand his pain as he cradled my lifeless body. “Forget about me, marry Marian, move on with your life. Don’t do this to yourself.”

“He can’t hear you,” said the Horned God somberly. “This is the River of Memory, and what you’re seeing now are events that will be recorded in the waves of eternity. You couldn’t interfere even if you wanted to.”

“Then why are you showing me this? Why?” I cried, torn between resignation towards my fate, and fury for Robin’s suffering.

“To give you closure before you move on to your afterlife, so you don’t become a true ghost, clinging to the upper world by the false hope that you could still be saved.” He was too close to me now, his hand outstretched. “It’s time for you both to move on.”

But I couldn’t move on until I was sure Robin had left the castle safely, to live his life the way he deserved to.

Instead, he bent to my lips, formed the words, “I love you,” against them, and pressed them with his own.

But nothing happened.

A burst of agony razed through me as I watched him pull back, gaze fixed on my limp form in his arms, before he let out an anguished cry.

He shook me, begging and pleading with me, with the Fates, with all the gods he knew by name.

“Fairuza, wake up. I mean it. I meant every word I ever said to you. I love you. I love you!”

But I still wasn’t pulled out of this pit of desperation and back into my body. Like the Horned God had said, it was too late.

All I could do was watch in futile torment as Robin held me tighter against him like it would kill him to let me go.

This was all I had ever wanted from him, and never thought I could have. His love.

Now I had it, I didn’t want it. Not like this.

*Not like this.*

I never wanted him to love me and suffer my loss for the rest of his life.

As if he could hear my anguished regret, his tears ran faster, drenching my cold, still face. “You showed me a new way to live, Fairuza, but I don’t want to go down that new path without you. I don’t want that future, or any at all, if you’re not in it. I can’t live without you now, and I won’t let you go.” Then he suddenly looked up, as if to the heavens, and shouted in defiance, “*I won’t!*”

I didn’t want him to. And I didn’t want to let him go, either. I was ready to become a true ghost, to be a welcome haunting following him through his adventures and achievements.

But I couldn’t. That would only trap him forever, would never give him the chance to let me go. To live his life. To ever find any measure of peace or happiness.

I had to move on, like the Horned God said, so he could.

Tearing my eyes away from the scene, my most ecstatic dream and most terrible nightmare come true, I trudged out of the river, my head hung low with desolation and defeat.

My soul bleeding out of me, I reached out to take Death’s outstretched hand, to let him lead me deeper into his domain, and away from the life I had never lived. The love I’d never had, and had just lost.



“What happens now?” I whispered. “Do I go to paradise or am I bound for—for...?”

Death didn’t answer. But when my fingertips brushed his palm, my chest locked up, and I felt like a rug had been pulled out from under me.

I fell back and down, down, down into an endless abyss.

I fell forever.

Then suddenly, a searing light flooded my eyes, making them burn.

Gasping like I had been underwater, lungs burning for air, tears flooded my eyes as they acclimated to the brightness, and...

A pair of tear-filled, forest-green eyes were staring down at me.

Was this the torment I had in store for me throughout my afterlife? Always seeing him and longing for him?

But that would also be my idea of paradise. If only I didn’t see him like I had in those last moments, anguished, desperate.

But since this was in my mind, I could tell this imaginary version of him to be happy.

“Robin,” I rasped, throat parched, voice insubstantial. “Robin, I...”

“You’re alive!”

## CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN



*A* live.  
Alive.  
*Alive.*

Robin said that word, again and again.

Robin who didn't feel like a figment of my imagination at all. Who felt solid and warm and wonderful as he pulled me into a desperate embrace, one that wouldn't end. One I was too boneless to return.

I just let my too-heavy head flop onto his shoulder, trying to believe him, to remember how to breathe real air, how to not jump at feeling real heartbeats within my chest. How to have flesh and bone again.

I melted into him and absorbed all the intensity of my regained senses. All of them focused on him as he encompassed me, his body trembling, his voice breaking over the same word again, and again. *Alive.*

"I'm—alive?" I finally whispered, thoughts sluggish with disbelief, still processing where I was, who I was, and what I was. *Alive.* "You saved me?"

He pulled back, hands shaking as he gripped my arms to hold me up so I could witness his elated, tear-stained face crumple. Then a barrage of questions assailed me, each one more agitated than the last.

"Why didn't you tell me I was the one you needed? Don't you know how much I wished I could be? I couldn't breathe most of the time with how much I wanted to be! But I thought I could never be, had to run around looking for *another man* to save you! Why did I have to work it out myself from all your cryptic, half-spoken statements? Do you have any idea what I felt after you disappeared again, and as I tore back here, hoping I was right, but fearing I could be too late anyway? I could have been! If I had arrived any later, you could have died!"

Stunned by how upset he was, jubilation still seeped through me at his every nuance and word. I raised my hand and did something I'd thought I never would.

I touched his cheek.

I couldn't believe that after what felt like a forever of yearning, of being intangible and untouchable, I could touch him.

He was real, as was I.

This wasn't a dying dream, but a miraculous revival.

"I thought...I thought..."

His eyes searched mine feverishly. "Yes?"

I shook my head, body and mind still rousing from my extended sleep slowly. "What about Marian?"

He frowned. "What about her?"

"You love her, you went to Faerie to save her, and you finally found her."

"Is that why you didn't tell me?" he exclaimed.

I ducked my head. "It is."

He gawked at me. "That's why you almost signed your own death warrant? Because you were too stubborn to ask me how I felt? After all we've been through, you're still making grand assumptions!"

"But you said—you told me..."

"Told you what? I never said I loved her."

"Leander told me you were promised to each other," I whispered, still feeling the pain of his unavailability, as both Reynard and Robin.

"There was talk of that, when we were very young. But we grew up, and I became Robin Hood, and we became companions who hunted and fought together. We never corrected anyone's assumptions, because it helped us both avoid unwanted attention. As for going to Faerie after her, have you met me? I risk my life for strangers. She's my friend, and Will is my brother-in-arms, and I would have done anything to get her back, when we thought she's been kidnapped."

Still feeling like a rag doll, I slipped off his lap and faced him urgently. "She might not have been kidnapped, but something as horrifying as the werewolf you saved me from that first night bit her, and she will need all the help she can get finding him. But you left her to come after me. You have to go back for her right now!"

He only shook his head. "I can't do that."

I gaped at him. "Why? If you're worried I'll sleep again, curses don't work that way."

He gave a weary exhalation. "I can't go after her, and neither can Will, because she said if we try to interfere, she'd shoot us both, and I had to respect her wishes—and arrows." As I exclaimed, he raised his hands. "Seriously, she said it's a magical infection, something like your curse, that demands a specific method of reversing it. The infected must best and kill the one who infected them themselves, or it won't work. That's why the Wild Hunt can only point her the werewolf's way. She has to hunt and kill it all on her own."

Disbelief and turmoil fogged my mind, encompassing everything from my encounter with Death, to watching Robin return for me, to confessing his love, to waking up—now this.

A tight ache spread from my haunches to the base of my skull, the pain of prolonged immobility mixing with dread. "Will—will she be okay?"

Robin exhaled. "I have to believe she will be. She's an incredible fighter, and she's ready for it now." He gathered my swaying body in his arms again. "She told us we needed to go home and live our lives at last, now the war is over. She promised she'd join us when she was done killing her werewolf."

We remained like this for a long while, just clinging to each other, feeling each other, and breathing.

He finally inhaled deeply. "She was right, like you have always been. It's about time I start living my life for me, too. I'll find a more efficient way of helping people, one that doesn't stretch me thinner than my bowstring."

"Or your violin strings," I said, the enormity of what was happening sinking through me in

degrees. “Think you still remember how to play?”

“I’ll be quite rusty, but you can be the judge of that.”

“I feel like you’ll surprise me, you always do.”

“You surprise me as well, in both heart-wrenching and delightful ways.” He pushed my hair behind my ear, eyes slowly traveling over my face. “I feel like I’ve met different versions of you, yet each felt as real as this one.”

“They were all real. I was only ever myself, completely, with you. But it still feels like the first time we’re really seeing each other, with no masks, hoods, apparitions, curses, or hidden identities.”

“Not exactly in that last bit, but let me fix that.” He gently let me go and stood up, bowing deeply before me. “Reynard Loxley II, son of Sir Lyall, the late, disgraced Earl of Sherwood, at your service, Your Highness. Friends call me Robin.” He took my hand, pressed a lingering kiss on its back. “It’s an honor and a pleasure to finally meet you in the flesh.”

Giggling, I delighted in the touch of his lips, at how tough and big and real his hand felt in mine. “Fairuza Silverthorn, Princess of Arbore, and the honor and pleasure are definitely all mine.”

“Now that introductions are out of the way, we really need to get out of here.” Still bending over me, he offered me his arm with the most exquisite smile. “I’d like to get you back home before it gets dark.”

Home. I wondered how long I’d been gone, and if Leander was still searching for that demigod. Or had he and everyone given me up for dead, or as good as, by now?

Linking my arm with his, he helped me onto unsteady feet, and supported me out of the room that had witnessed my worst times, but also my most significant and happiest moments so far, both with him.

Through our descent from the tower, I felt the dark magic receding from my body, and I regained my strength and mobility, enough to steady myself by the time we reached the ground floor.

I was starting to worry if the briar field was still there, and how I’d clear it with Robin, when he pulled open the front door to reveal a clear view.

My curse, and all its amendments and counter-reinforcements, was broken.

Despite being literal, living proof of that fact, after a lifetime with its perpetual shadow darkening my every thought and cell, I couldn’t fully believe it yet.

Amabel galloped over to us, whinnying excitedly. I held out my arms, joyful tears springing from my eyes again as I wrapped my arms around her neck, a true hug this time.

“You are the best, bravest girl, Mabily,” I sobbed to her as I stroked her long powerful neck. “I don’t know what I would have done without you, in Faerie, and all my life. And from now on, there will be no more sneaking out to you when I can. Now it’s open fields and riding and playing—and apples and sugar, every day!”

She snorted and shimmied, seemingly delighted with my promise. I pulled back to rain kisses on her face.

“What about me?” Robin joined me in showering Amabel with affection, making her ears wiggle happily, his warm eyes melting indulgence over me. “Don’t I get at least one kiss for a job well done?”

There was the opening I needed to broach the insecurities that still niggled at me. “And now it is done, where do we go from here?”

“To your family, you know that.”

“I meant us.” I licked my parched lips. “You said you loved me, and you meant it, otherwise I wouldn’t be here.”

“I do mean it, with everything in me.” He suddenly frowned. “But I understand if you don’t feel the same.”

I pounced on him, grabbing his arms, still reeling at the feel of him. “Of course I do! Why would you think I don’t?”

He waved his hand around his head. “I’m the furthest thing from what you wanted, or what your parents would approve of. I’m half-fey, I lost my father’s title and lands, I’m a wanted man—the worst fit for even a lady, let alone a princess.” His mouth quirked in a resigned smirk. “The second they have you back, they’ll thank me, hopefully not arrest me, and send me on my way with a reward, then arrange for you to marry some prince or king.”

“They won’t. If they insist, *I* won’t be a princess anymore. Everything we’ve been through together made me realize who I am and what I want. I’m not meant to be a king’s wife or mother. I want to be more than that, and you want to be more than a vigilante. And I want us to be what we want to be, together.” I placed a trembling hand on his stubbled cheek, stomach in knots. “So are you going to stay with me, or will you vanish into the night again?”

He leaned into my touch with a squeeze of his eyes and a quiet groan. “I’ll stay as long as you want me to. If it’s for the rest of my life, then that’s what I’ll do.” Before I could jump with joy to give him that kiss he’d asked for, he added, “Besides, I miss spending time with your brother. And if I’m not arrested, I could talk to your father about a few things regarding the kingdom on a civilian level. I won’t make any promises about respecting Prince Jonquil, though. I’d sooner make him bow to me.”

“How would you make a prince bow to you?”

“Easy, with an arrow in his knee.”

Painful as that sounded, I couldn’t help laughing at how blunt he was about it. But then, he was the only one who could make me laugh this way. Everything he did made me feel—free.

And now I truly was. After a lifetime of having an executioner’s axe hanging over my neck, and the shackles of my status around it, they’d both been lifted.

As for all the obstacles that still lay ahead of me, of us, they didn’t matter. We’d just surmount them together.

I reached out to brush a sandy curl off his forehead as I’d been longing to since I’d first seen his face. “Try not to do that with any witnesses around. I can’t have you locked away for treason before our marriage can offer you immunity.”

His eyebrows shot up, his expression at once stunned, elated and mischievous. “Are you proposing to me?”

“Do you accept my proposal?” I cupped his face with both hands, reveling in my return to my body, our closeness, and the possibility of all that I had thought unreachable before.

Robin put his hands over mine, palms rough and lined with bowstring scars. “I’ll accept whatever ensures that I’ll never find you gone ever again. I’ve lost too much in life and I survived. But I’d rather die than lose you.”

My tears ran free as I wiped at one that escaped his vivid eyes, smearing it over an enchanting cluster of freckles. Then I reached up to trace the pointed tip of his ear, a shuddering breath escaping me as he closed his eyes in relief at my touch. What I had once thought features worth disdain and mistrust, had become most fascinating and beloved, only because they were parts of him.

“I’d rather die than be without you, too,” I said, rising on my toes to return his life-saving kiss.

Long have I dreamt of this moment, wondering whether it would be like the ballads and books describe. All the elements were there, the brave warrior on the white horse had ridden in the nick of time to the tower, and saved the slumbering princess with true love’s kiss.

But as our lips touched, I knew that stories, like those told about Robin Hood, were only a mere fraction of the truth.

No songs or ballads could do this moment, this love and devotion, this happiness, justice.

Not that they wouldn't try. I would. I had a lifetime now, thanks to my noblest of men, to try.

We parted, stared at each other, and smiled so widely, it hurt.

Then we were laughing, and laughing. Free, alive, and with a whole life full of adventures ahead of us.

At one point, we left Briarfell behind, with me steering Amabel, and Robin giving me directions in my first horseback ride throughout the lands of my kingdom.

We rode towards the sun, following its trek across the sky, heading into our future together.

## EPILOGUE



*Six Months Later*

From the wings of the Eglantine opera house, I could see rows upon rows of guests from all over the kingdom and beyond. They were here to attend the first showing of *The Verdant Vigilante*, high society's first foray into musical theater.

Halfway between a play and an operetta, it was a rushed job that I would perfect later. Tonight was a test to gauge responses to my efforts.

All the proceeds from this initial run would go to a charity Robin and I had founded, to help the wounded, widows, and orphans of war. If this experiment was successful, every idea I'd realize would continue as such.

My first go at the stage had begun with guest performances in established operas, to live out my dream of performing. It had proved a great draw for the nobility who wanted to see the princess sing, and ticket sales had risen to unprecedented levels. The sizable chunk I was owed had gone to the families my uncle had wronged. Safe to say, he'd found this offensive, and was not in attendance tonight.

The rest of my family though, was in the top box. They sat with Leander, Bonnie, Lord Gestum, and his wife Jessamine, who had their five-month-old son in her lap, named after Robin for his catalytic role in their previously-thought-impossible marriage.

"Are you going to watch the whole show from the wings?"

I turned, found Robin with his leaf-embellished green-and-gold coat over his arm, and glasses of sparkling cider in his hands. His tie was loosened and his hair had no semblance of the tidiness I had wrangled it into earlier.

"You couldn't go one hour looking presentable?"

"Your family and their friends won't form a higher opinion of me, so who's there to impress?"

"Me," I said in mock disapproval.

He handed me my glass as he brushed his nose against mine. "Liar. You like me like this."

I chuckled an agreement, unable not to brush a kiss on his lips. "You could still make the effort. This is my big night."

"Your real big night will be when all the props are finished and you have your ideal cast singing."

"That won't be before next mid-winter. But it will give me time to make it a grand occasion, with all the winter decor. Not to mention the expanded audience of all the Northland vacationers fleeing

their frozen homeland.”

“Just look at you,” he said proudly. “You would have been wasted sitting in some obnoxious, overgrown brat’s castle far away. But here you are, putting on shows, and finessing money out of rich people, more efficiently than I ever managed, and putting it into the hands of the poor.”

I twisted my lips at him. “You make it sound like I’m swindling them. With what they’re getting for their money, it’s an exchange, not a robbery.”

He smiled over his glass, eyes glimmering with that humor I’d never get enough of. “It’s the thought that counts.”

“It does. But you’ll realize the wealthy will willingly pay more than you could ever steal, if they think they’re getting something coveted by their peers. It’s all a competition to them, just like my mother still mourning our not marrying another king’s offspring, despite her dissatisfaction with her own regal match.”

Robin snorted into his drink. “Poor Queen Zomoroda, you deprived her of boasting to the ladies at court with your unimpressive choices.”

I poked him lovingly. “Bonnie and you are not only impressive, you’re heroes! And she and all those courtiers won’t forget it, because I will write as many stage productions as I can, not just about you, but everyone like you.”

“Changing popular opinion through entertainment—it has been known to happen.” He looked up to the top box and waved at my family. “It’s already changed me from pest to folk hero.”

I waved, too, receiving enthusiastic and supportive gestures from Leander, Esmeralda, and Florian.

Mother’s last hope for royal marriages, our younger siblings had just become betrothed at the ripe age of twelve and ten, to the Armorican heir and princess, fourteen and eight. Their betrothed were in the box across from my family’s with their father, King Guillaume, and their ambassador.

Though Esme didn’t seem thrilled with her match, and I could see another rebellion coming Mother’s way, she and Florian were delighted with Robin. Leander was ecstatic, for my safety and happiness, and for having one of his dearest friends as his future brother-in-law. But the smugness filling him to the brim came from the doubled amount of spite dropped in our mother’s snobbish lap with our future morganatic marriages.

But my own match mortified her far more, since she’d believed I’d marry a king my whole life. Now, instead of princes and princesses, my children would be lords and ladies, children of the newly made Duke of Sherwood, and they would do whatever they wanted with their lives.

As for Robin, Father had recognized his heroics in saving Arbore’s princess by striking all charges against him from the record, raising him from earl to duke, and restoring to him his ancestral lands—what he now ran with his ears on full display. Robin was also studying under the current Minister of Internal Affairs. He’d one day take over and reform laws for the betterment of our people.

We were finding our purposes in life, and helping each other achieve them like I’d dreamed.

Robin set his hand on my lower back. “Time to join your guests, and watch the show.”

I started to protest, my need to supervise overwhelming me, but he herded me away from the stage and towards our seats.

As I passed by the audience, I noticed Bonnie’s father, Seamus Fairborn with his new wife Ivy, and stepson, Oliver, sitting beside Will, Jon, and my fairy godmothers. But I forgot them and all of existence once the orchestra launched into the first melody and the curtains parted.

All my being hung on every sound and movement as the acts progressed. I mouthed every word of the lines I’d written, and hummed every note of the musical numbers I’d composed, excitement and



anxiety clashing within me. Robin let me mangle his hands in my spastic grip as I bated my breath for the audience's reactions to this new medium, and my work.

They burst into laughter at the lines Robin had cherry-picked from his experiences, and clapped hard and sometimes cheered at the end of every act. When the show ended, a standing ovation was given to the cast and orchestra, and I melted back into a puddle of relief.

"Get up!" Robin urged.

Flushing with delight and self-consciousness, I stood and bowed, hand over a hammering heart full with enough pride and gratitude to burst as the applause stormed louder.

Afterwards, Robin swept me to the theater door, where we remained until the last group exited, thanking everyone for attending and shaking their hands. I ignored any wary or disapproving looks shot Robin's way. He wiggled his pointy ears at those who stared too long.

Leander ambushed us from behind, in the throes of a fit of laughter. "I can't believe you got all the people Robin Hood targeted cheering for him."

"You're next." Bonnie appeared by his side. "I've just finished my book on the Beast of Rosemead, and Fairuza will adapt it for the stage."

Leander stopped laughing. "I thought you were joking about that."

"Don't look so betrayed," I teased. "It'll be fun."

"And full of embellishments," Bonnie assured him. "I won't have anyone connecting the dots."

Leander worked his jaw. "You better not. This Crown Prince job is hard enough without immortalizing the rumors about my beastly period. And don't make my character sing any embarrassing songs."

Robin patted him on the chest. "Don't worry, wolf-man, your numbers will only be howls at a bulbous chandelier that looks like the moon."

Leander shoved Robin's head, making him cackle. "That's it. No songs at all. Make it a regular play."

I shrugged, knowing I'd get around him later. "Less work for me."

As the two men continued teasing each other, I saw Agnë and Jon swinging their clasped hands like children. Fondness at their sweet displays rose along with regret, since I wouldn't be seeing them much after this. Agnë was returning to Winter and taking Jon with her.

Meira was sticking around, claiming that I "needed a friend." Which I did, and was grateful for, but I knew a good part of the reason she was staying was to explore her relationship with Will.

"What about your story?" Bonnie asked me.

"Since it has all of you, I think it deserves a full-scale opera, or a ballet," I said. "But I have so many ideas besides that, and it's hard to pick what to produce next."

Robin pulled me close and kissed my forehead. "Good thing you have the rest of a long life to see them all through."

I rested against him, at ease in his arms. "I do. I really do."

We all grinned at each other with that still disbelieving delight that our curses were broken, and we were together, safe, and happy.

Our conversation was interrupted when my family, King Guillaume, and his entourage arrived, and we began to pile out of the theater.

Robin, Will, Leander, and Jon held the lead, debating who could jump down the longest flight of stairs, while Clancy chided them for being childish. They seemed to revert to their boyhood when they were together.

I found myself again longing to have met Robin when Leander had. It could have saved us so much

trouble.

But it probably wouldn't have. No. I'd met him when I'd most needed him. I couldn't think of a more perfect time or way we could have met.

Bonnie, Jessamine, and my godmothers walked with me, which pleased me as much as the responses my work had received tonight. I'd always wanted true companions, not sycophants or servants paid to tolerate me.

Now I had these ladies, who understood me and desired my company for no other reason but that they enjoyed it. Not to mention they enjoyed discussing our overlapping experiences no matter how repetitive it got.

As we descended the final flight of stairs to our carriages, the ladies discovered a previously untouched topic—Keenan, who would make an appearance in a future work of mine.

"I can't believe that lunatic is your cousin," Meira grumbled to Bonnie.

"The mildly sadistic Autumn fairy who rides a reindeer is indeed my paternal cousin." Bonnie laughed. "Why? What prank did he pull on you?"

"Prank?" Meira squeaked. "He almost got us eaten by ghouls!"

"And almost got Jon killed by that headless horseman," Agnë added.

I found myself in the strange position of having to defend Keenan. "That really wasn't his fault. He did try to warn Jon."

As Agnë gave me an uncharacteristic sullen look, Bonnie rushed to ask her, "You're from Winter, right? I lost a friend there and Keenan went after her, but I haven't heard anything from him since."

"If you mean Ornella, she's fine." Agnë said.

"More than fine," Meira grumbled. "She got the Winter King before we could get to him. Centuries he spends cursed and alone, and the second we have use for him, some dryad snaps him up."

"Dryad?" Bonnie and Jessamine exclaimed in unison.

Meira raised her hands. "That's for your crazy cousin to tell you during your next reunion."

"He better." Bonnie turned to me, cornflower-blue eyes brimming with excitement. "What did you think about my book? What medium would best fit a story set in Faerie?"

"One that hasn't been invented yet," said a new voice.

All three fairies froze.

But it was Bonnie who spun hard on her heel. "You!"

I turned, too, and found a fairy with curly red hair piled high on her head. She was wearing a glittering, light-green gown, pink, cat-eyed spectacles, and a dreamy smile. From the others' reactions, and a gut instinct, there was no mistaking who she was.

"Come back to curse me again?" I gritted.

"Quite the opposite." The Spring Queen's smile turned blithe. "I've come to congratulate you."

"Shouldn't Leander and me surviving to adulthood dismay you, Your Majesty?"

"As I already told Bonniel and your brother, cursing you brought me no joy. Your parents forced my hand," she said, unbothered by my bitterness. "If I wanted mere vengeance I would have turned you into beetles and stomped on you. Instead, I cursed you to teach Florent and Zomoroda lessons in honoring promises and respecting other monarchs, not to mention to prevent a war. And I gave you the means to free yourselves."

Bonnie crossed her arms. "Knowing that isn't going to change how we feel about what you did, or what we went through to get here, Etheline."

I was taken aback at Bonnie calling her by her name before remembering she'd known her most of

her life. The Spring Queen had masqueraded as a tavern owner in Bonnie's little town in Ericura to keep an eye on her. Ada had even once worked for her.

Bonnie uncrossed her arms with a sigh. "But, I will admit that without you, neither of us would have met our future husbands."

That was true. Her curses had ended with us happy, in a way we would have never been otherwise.

"Maybe you should consider me your fairy godmother." Etheline turned to Jessamine, reaching for her son, her seafoam-green eyes emanating an eerie glow. "Here, let me bless your child with a gift."

"I don't think so!" Clutching baby Robin to her chest, Jessamine ran down to where the men were blissfully unaware of our visitor.

Etheline tutted. "I wouldn't have done anything as bad as what your actual godmothers did for you, Princess. Which was worse than nothing."

"They did all they could to fix what *you* did," I defended Meira and Agnë heatedly. "Which was more the work of a malevolent matchmaker than a fairy godmother."

"*Magnificent* matchmaker," Agnë corrected, all but bowing and scraping. "You indirectly chose such wonderful spouses for these siblings, Your Majesty."

"Still terrified of confrontation, aren't you, Agnessa?" Etheline huffed, then pursed her lips at Meira. "As for you, Meropë, meddlesome hothead that you are, you altered my curse. You think you can just mess with my magic?"

Meira's only response was a fearful squeak.

I put myself between them, jabbing my finger at Etheline angrily. "It was her right as my godmother to look out for me, and altering it was the only way she could do so. It's largely on account of that, and all of Angë's and Meira's other efforts on my behalf, that I'm alive today. Whatever offense you take at that is your problem, not theirs."

Bonnie tugged at my sleeve. "Fay, best not to do what your mother did."

"She's not," Etheline said, surprising us both. "Her mother was a foolish, prejudiced brat, who never admitted her family's or her own wrongdoing, and she still is. And her father let that catastrophe he's been saddled with get away with anything just to avoid the headache of confronting her. He was also an oath-breaker. Both upset me for their own purposes. Fairuza, on the other hand, is displaying something I didn't think her capable of."

I squared my shoulders as I met her gaze head on. "What's that?"

"Putting someone else's feelings and safety before your own, even if it's a fairy who lied to you for years. That's the last thing to draw my ire." Etheline set a hand on my shoulder as she circled me, inspecting me. "That's all I needed to see for myself, that you have become someone worth the love of the noblest of men, as he is worth a passionate, loyal, responsible princess. I am pleased."

Tension melted from my bones, softening my posture and my feelings towards this woman. Who would have thought it possible?

But after everything I'd been through, I knew for a fact, anything was.

The men's voices called from below for Bonnie, Meira, and Agnë, with Jon complaining the loudest about being late for dinner.

"You better run, they sound famished." Etheline chuckled, winking at Agnë. "The Fates know how much food it takes to fuel your giant."

Choking on embarrassment, Agnë didn't waste a second getting away from Etheline, curtsying, then bolting down, with Meira flying behind her.

Bonnie still hovered at the top of the stairs. "Any news on my cousin and Ornella? Is it true she's

with the Winter King?"

Etheline smiled widely. "Ornella freed Yulian from the dismal fate your mother subjected him to. And they dealt poetic justice to the evil that lurked in their lives. As for Keenan, he'll no doubt return with interesting tales for you to chronicle soon."

Bonnie frowned. "Is this all you're telling me?"

"Yes. I'm not here to catch up, but to witness the last of my loose ends tying themselves at last."

Bonnie nodded cautiously. "Good to know all is right in the world, then."

Etheline let out a chilling laugh. "Far from it. The Folkshore is in for an interesting shake-up. In fact, I'll steer clear of your world for a while. I'd hate to be involved in the conflicts of the gods and the Underworld."

This reminded me of Princess Ariane and my last-minute rescue from the Horned God. But it was the conversation I'd eavesdropped on between him and the three-headed goddess that resonated with her words. Something about an insidious disease that could bring both our world and the divine realm toppling down.

I for one, didn't want to know anything about this, if I didn't absolutely have to.

"What gods?" Robin appeared by my side, as stealthy as ever, his grin turning into wide-eyed surprise as he saw the queen. "Etheline?"

She nodded gracefully. "Hello, Reynard."

Robin and I shared a look of bewilderment.

Then we asked in unison, "You know her?"

"She's the Spring Queen!" I said.

"She's my aunt!" he said.

I swayed back, colliding with his chest. He held me protectively as we both faced Etheline.

"Aunt," I mumbled in shock. "You never told me your mother was a fairy princess."

"I never knew till this moment." Robin seemed to find it as hard to speak. "Etheline visited me after my mother's glamor faded, gave me my enchanted green cloak, and my bow and arrows. She never told me anything beyond our relationship and her name."

"Are all fairy princesses this flighty?" I whispered, realizations piling up inside my mind. "Didn't your mother also leave her betrothed, Bonnie—the one I'm just realizing was King Yulian?"

Etheline sighed. "Lureline didn't have the excuse Bonnibel's mother had for fleeing. She merely found life on the Folkshore mind-numbingly dull." Etheline waved off further questions. "That's the price of marrying a fairy. Your father knew what he was getting into. She'll be back, eventually."

Robin tensed behind me. "In that case, tell her not to bother."

"Harsh, but as someone who was abandoned callously, I understand." Etheline nodded, no doubt meaning my father breaking their engagement. "I hope I'll be invited to your weddings, at least."

"Will you show up anyway and curse our firstborn if we don't?" I asked, mock-sweetly.

Etheline barely batted an eyelash. "No, your offspring will be of little importance. There is no statement to be made by cursing someone that far down the line of succession."

That was the most reassuring thing I'd heard in ages. It further proved how right I was to defy my mother's plans for me.

Robin loosened his protective hold on me to face Etheline. "If I have your word on that, it would be an honor to count you among my family party, along with Will's family, and my army comrades."

Etheline took our hands, clasping them between hers. "I eagerly await that day. Do you know when it will be?"

"We wanted it to be sooner," I said. "But my cousin Cyrus's wedding is next summer, and Bonnie

and Leander will wed after his birthday in winter.” I looked up at Robin, saw my excitement reflected in his beautiful eyes. “So our wedding will be the spring after.”

“Spring. An appropriate time.” Of course, she would think that. “That will be a blink of an eye for me. But for you, treasure all the time you have together, for you have beaten the odds, and withstood radical changes to be the right ones for each other.” Etheline released our hands, sweeping away with a delicate wave. “Oh, and Fairuza? When you and Bonnibel feature me in your stories, don’t paint me too dark a villain, will you?”

“I’ll be sure to have the Faerie Queen dressed in pastels,” I said.

Etheline laughed lightly at my evasion, and disappeared.

As soon as she did, Bonnie ran down to join Leander.

We stood in silence, staring at where the Spring Queen had just been.

Then I wrapped my arms around Robin’s trim waist, looking up at him. “So, this sort of makes you a fairy prince.”

He spluttered, before transitioning into a worn-out chuckle. “Really? That’s what you got from that visit?”

“Well, there’s also the fact that she got her way with both Leander and me marrying fairies with royal blood. But in my case, she got exactly what I thought she’d been steering me towards, just not who I thought it was. I ended up with her undisclosed nephew.”

He did a double take, as if that hadn’t registered before I’d said it.

Then he shook his head vigorously. “Oh, no. That makes that blue-haired peacock my cousin. And I tried to make him marry you!”

I laughed at his horror, knowing we’d be dealing with the ramifications of what all that meant, and not caring one bit.

He blew out a forcible breath. “Thankfully, I’m only half-fey, so he can keep the Prince of Spring title, thank you very much. But knowing who she is, makes me connect so many dots. This turnout does feel a little suspicious now.”

“Makes you question what was fate, and what was fairies.” Letting him go with another laugh, I picked up my slim skirt, and ran down the steps in the mid-winter air

He beat me to the bottom, hands held out to receive me. “They’re the same word in Campanian languages, *fata*.”

Slipping my arm through his, I grinned up at him, everything that had happened tonight settling down on me like a cloak of relief, disbelief, and contentment. “I’d rather not enter an existential debate about fairies as weavers of fates. But whatever she did, she only maneuvered us in each other’s path. Everything else, was and will always be, all us.”

“No debates about this, ever.” He squeezed me exuberantly, before he added, “And no wondering what Etheline was talking about when she referenced conflict among the gods. That is way beyond us.”

I pulled him down for a kiss. “Good to see you know your limits. Wouldn’t want you attempting to become an epic hero.”

He returned my kiss, his lips lingering on mine longer. “I would have been tempted, if I didn’t want as long a life as possible with you. Interfering in the affairs of gods is typically a guarantee of dying young.”

I clutched him harder, the idea of losing him unbearable. “Which is something I’ve had enough of worrying about. So, no heroics!”

The twinkle of adoration in his eyes made my heart pirouette in my chest as he murmured, “Your

wish is my command, Your Highness. Besides, I've settled for being a national character. Someone else can be the epic hero whose myth spans kingdoms."

As we reached the carriages, he helped me up into our shared one with Leander and his party. He settled between myself and Jessamine, cooing at his little namesake.

Watching them all chat, I was filled with that exquisite sense of happiness and contentment I'd never felt until Robin. It now took on a more encompassing feel as I pondered how we'd all left harrowing experiences behind, just as we left the theater that had displayed my artistic take on Robin's adventures.

Perhaps that was the best thing for us to do. To separate our futures from our pasts, view them as we viewed ballads and epic poetry.

And that's what we would become in time, stories that would outlive us, tales of hope, triumph, and love for those who need them.

But few would ever know how our tales had entwined, or that we all became one fantastical family.

Threading our fingers together, I leaned my head on Robin's shoulder and he rested his cheek against my hair.

I savored feeling him, on every level now. I delighted in experiencing our deepening bond of trust and understanding, of appreciation and affection.

This was what I'd never thought a princess born to a cruel curse, and bred for an empty arrangement could find, or deserve.

This unbridled love with the only one for me was the truest magic there was.

Our lives might be fictionalized in the future, but right now we were real, and we belonged together.

What came after, that was not for me to worry about anymore.

## NOTE FROM THE AUTHOR

I hope you've enjoyed [DREAMER OF BRIARFELL](#) as I enjoyed writing it!

Reviews and word of mouth are the life-blood of Indie Authors, so if you enjoyed the book, please help me spread the word!

Even a line on [Amazon](#), [Goodreads](#) and [Bookbub](#) would be vital to my success and to the book's sales, and would be hugely appreciated.

If you haven't yet, please read where it all began in the #1 Amazon Bestsellers, [THIEF OF CAHRAMAN](#), [PRINCE OF CAHRAMAN](#) and [QUEEN OF CAHRAMAN](#) followed by [BEAST OF ROSEMEAD](#) & [BEAUTY OF ROSEMEAD](#) and [PRINCESS OF MIDNIGHT](#).

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To find out when it's out, and other exclusive content, news, updates and offers, please sign up to my [VIP Mailing List](#).

I also love to hear from my readers, so please contact me at [lucytempestauthor@gmail.com](mailto:lucytempestauthor@gmail.com)

Thank you for reading!

Lucy

## PRONUNCIATION GUIDE

### — People

Agnë: Aag-nee  
Björn: Bee-yore-ne  
Etheline: Eth-ell-leen  
Fairuza: Fay-roo-zah  
Jonquil: Jon-quill  
Leander: Lee-an-durr  
Lycaon: Lie-kay-on  
Marzeya: Mahr-zay-yah  
Meira: May-ruh  
Merope: Meh-roe-pee  
Reynard: Ray-nahrd  
Willoughby: Willow-bee  
Zafira: Zaa-fee-rah  
Zomoroda: Zoh-murr-roh-dah

### — Places:

Ericura: Air-ree-cue-ruh  
Almaskham: Ul-maz-kham  
Arbore: Are-bore  
Cahraman: Quh-rah-maahn  
Campania: Kaam-pahn-yuh  
Nexia: Neck-see-yah



## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

With one foot in reality and the other one lodged firmly in fantasy, Lucy Tempest has been spinning tales since she learned how to speak.

Now, as an author, people can experience the worlds she creates for themselves.

Lucy lives in Southern California with her family and two spoiled cats, who would make terrible familiars.

Her young adult fantasy series FAIRYTALES OF FOLKSHORE is a collection of interconnected fairytale retellings, each with a unique twist on a beloved, timeless tale.

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Thief of Cahraman

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Beast of Rosemead

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Dreamer of Briarfell